

---

# Theological Education

ISSUE FOCUS: *The Public Character of Theological Education*

**Theme Introduction**

*Robin W. Lovin, Richard J. Mouw*

**The Public Character of Theological Education:  
An Evangelical Perspective**

*David Jones, Jeffrey Greenman, Christine Pohl*

**The Public Character of Theological Education: A Perspective  
from Roman Catholic Schools of Theology and Seminaries**

*Jeremiah J. McCarthy, William Morell, O.M.I., William McGrattan,  
Daniel McLellan, O.F.M., Kevin O'Neil, C.Ss.R.*

**The Public Character of Mainline Theological Education**

*Elizabeth C. Nordbeck, Douglas F. Ottati*

**The Public Character of the University-Related Divinity School**

*Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, Robin W. Lovin, Richard J. Wood*

OPEN FORUM

**A Contextual Theology of Leadership**

*Diane Kennedy, O.P.*

**A Womanist Perspective on Spirituality in Leadership**

*Emilie M. Townes*

Volume 37  
Number 1  
Autumn 2000

**ats**



---

# Theological Education

---

VOLUME 37

NUMBER 1

---

<b>Introduction</b>	vii
<i>Daniel O. Aleshire</i>	
<b>ISSUE FOCUS: <i>The Public Character of Theological Education</i></b>	
<b>Theme Introduction</b>	ix
<i>Robin W. Lovin, Richard J. Mouw</i>	
<b>The Public Character of Theological Education: An Evangelical Perspective</b>	1
<i>David Jones, Jeffrey Greenman, Christine Pohl</i>	
<b>The Public Character of Theological Education: A Perspective from Roman Catholic Schools of Theology and Seminaries</b>	17
<i>Jeremiah J. McCarthy, William Morell, O.M.I., William McGrattan, Daniel McLellan, O.F.M., Kevin O'Neil, C.Ss.R.</i>	
<b>The Public Character of Mainline Theological Education</b>	33
<i>Elizabeth C. Nordbeck, Douglas F. Ottati</i>	
<b>The Public Character of the University-Related Divinity School</b>	49
<i>Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, Robin W. Lovin, Richard J. Wood</i>	
<b>OPEN FORUM</b>	
<b>A Contextual Theology of Leadership</b>	63
<i>Diane Kennedy, O.P.</i>	
<b>A Womanist Perspective on Spirituality in Leadership</b>	73
<i>Emilie M. Townes</i>	

**2000-2002 Editorial Board**

Glenn T. Miller, Chair  
Bangor Theological Seminary

Lawrence Brennan  
Kenrick-Glennon Seminary

Stephen Crocco  
Princeton Theological Seminary

Alan Hayes  
Wycliffe College

Serene Jones  
Yale University Divinity School

Emilie Townes  
Union Theological Seminary

## *Continuing the Conversation*

*Theological Education* invites responses, of up to 1500 words, to articles published in the journal in order to foster conversation among its readers. Reader responses may be e-mailed to the Managing Editor at <merrill@ats.edu>. Responses are published at the discretion of the editors and may be edited for length.

### **Information Technology in the New Century: Will We Learn to Ride This Horse?**

*Theological Education* recently brought together the reflections of former ATS presidents on the future of theological education in the new millennium.<sup>1</sup> While the presidents discussed a wide array of important issues, such as denominational identity, money, human sexuality, globalization, Canadian cultural distinctiveness, and religious pluralism, four of the six writers raised the contentious issue of technology. Russell H. Dilday called for schools to employ emerging technologies appropriately, especially in distance learning.<sup>2</sup> James L. Waits asserted that such technology will have “a crucial impact” on theological education, and he called on decision-makers to assess how it might change the ways that schools teach, students learn, and how schools communicate their missions.<sup>3</sup> Luder G. Whitlock noted that information technology, while expensive, holds promise for defeating the physical distance between students and teacher, and offers new possibility for lay education.<sup>4</sup> Barbara Brown Zikmund contended that information technology may fundamentally change theological education, forever altering our seminaries as educational entrepreneurs market online courses taught by “star” professors and schools wrestle with the issue of whether or not meeting in a chat room is, in fact, the kind of togetherness required for sound pedagogy.<sup>5</sup>

In the view of all these commentators, information technology is not going to roll over and play dead. As a librarian, I am almost daily reminded that students and faculty members value information technology. Research indicates that professors are increasingly willing to pay the price in time in order to learn to use it effectively.<sup>6</sup> Students and professors imagine that, in the future, seminaries will provide more and more access to tools like remotely accessed databases, Internet search engines, and online course reserves. Reaching a technology plateau does not seem to be a desirable option. At the same time, James L. Waits reported, many decision-makers in our theological schools are cautious “for reasons of community, quality, peer learning, and tradition,”<sup>7</sup> to ride the horse of technology off into an unknown future.

By way of response to the insights of these educators, I want to continue the discussion of two issues that are pertinent to the decisions facing many ATS schools as they employ information technology in the new century. The issues are the pace of technological change and the various costs of commitment to the ongoing use of information technology.

### **The Pace of Technological Change**

The first issue is change. Information technology has its own rhythms of change that may stress already changing organizations. Software publishers constantly enhance their products to provide more features. This is true for applications, and for networking and

operating systems. Every so often there are truly qualitative software changes that seem to require starting over with new hardware and software (for instance, in moving from the mainframe model to client/server networks).

The challenge facing our schools is to learn to integrate the sometimes unpredictable cycles of technological change into the long-range planning procedures of our boards and committees. Seminaries may invest months of time in creating five- or ten-year plans. In the realm of information technology, however, a three-year plan is considered long-range. Schools that make the commitment to stay in the middle of the technological herd (not to mention those committed to leading it) must be prepared to be far more nimble than they have been in the past. Information technology shows no signs of reaching stasis.

#### **The Costs of Technological Commitment**

The second issue I raise is the various costs of ongoing commitment to the use of information technology. This technology is frightening to many seminary administrators, in my view, because its costs seem uncountable. There is a tremendous paradox at work here. New computer hardware costs a fraction of the cost per unit of storage or calculating power of equipment that was purchased five years ago. But human expectations escalate. The database that ran on a single computer in the library in 1995 (to the delight of all) should now, in the view of faculty and students, be accessible to several at a time working in the library or at home. The single multi-media projector that was gratefully shared by the two professors who had mastered the intricacies of PowerPoint in 1997 cannot now be shared by the majority of the faculty, PowerPoint-ers all, who respectfully suggest to the technology committee that all classrooms become technologically "smart."

I agree with Barbara Brown Zikmund that information technology is as revolutionary as the industrial revolution and that, moreover, "we can literally *become* new kinds of institutions because of technology."<sup>8</sup> In my view, whether we are aware it or not, we all made a qualitative leap when we began to use networked information for the administration of our schools, the creation of course content, and the teaching of classes. In many of our schools, however, the implications have not become crystal clear to many decision-makers.

Two aspects of this qualitative leap are especially important for seminaries. First, a revolution in information technology does not mean that all older forms of communication in seminary life are scrapped. This tends to mask the reality of the revolution. People still speak, send memos, and teach courses face-to-face. Furthermore, for the foreseeable future, seminary libraries will continue to purchase journals and monographs, as well as electronic resources.<sup>9</sup> The new technology supplements, but does not replace, the older methods of information delivery and storage.

Second, in my view the costs to schools for information technology will only grow in dollars, even though the cost of computing power per unit continues to drop. Many schools have already seen a progression from stand-alone machines to local area networks to distance learning. The actual costs of all this information technology involve hardware, software, as well as salaries and benefits for computer technicians, webmasters, and instructional technologists. Faculty members and support staff also spend expensive time in order to learn how use information technology. Ongoing personnel costs ultimately exceed the costs for wires, boxes, and electricity.

I do not wish to raise a club in neo-Luddite fashion. Seminaries may prudently decide to spend money for

information technology, with all its attendant costs. My point is that once we decide that this technology is not a frill but an important set of tools for the job of theological education, we will have implicitly committed ourselves to endless future cycles of technological refreshment and training, all the while competing in the broader market place for technologically fluent staff. And we will still make photocopies and buy library books.

### **On Horseback**

One of the unintended consequences of the Spanish conquest of Mexico was the loss of stray horses. These feral horses grew in number. In time, Indian tribes learned to break and ride them. The consequences were stunning. The Apaches were able to make their influence felt over a tremendous stretch of territory, owing to their mastery of the horse. Theological schools, in my view, are still learning to break and ride the horse of information technology. The result is, no doubt, some broken bones, sprained muscles, and laughter from bystanders with more sense. I believe that most ATS schools serve churches whose members embrace information technology as utterly normal. Canadian and American seminaries, consequently, face the challenges that information technology poses for planning, staffing, and funding. One suspects that, having learned to ride, we will be glad that we did.

*Timothy D. Lincoln  
Director of the Library and Institutional  
Effectiveness, Austin Presbyterian  
Theological Seminary, Austin, Texas*

### ENDNOTES

1. *Theological Education* 36:2 (Spring 2000). Issue Focus: Former ATS Presidents Reflect on the Future of Theological Education in the New Millennium. All subsequent references to presidential reflections pertain to this issue.
2. Russell H. Dilday, "Theological Education at the Edge of a New Century," 43-44.
3. James L. Waits, "Looking Forward, Looking Backward: A View of Theological Education at the Beginning of a New Millennium," especially 54.
4. Luder G. Whitlock, "Theological Education in the Twenty-First Century," 57-58.
5. Barbara Brown Zikmund, "Reflections on My Twenty-Five Years in Theological Education," 57-58.
6. See, for instance, Stephen E. Wimberly, Jr. and William G. Jones, "Time and Technology: A Decade-Long Look at Humanists' Use of Electronic Information Technology," *College & Research Libraries* (September 2000): 421-431. L.G. Whitlock also noted the increased use of information technology by professors themselves (p. 57).
7. Waits, 53-54.
8. Brown Zikmund, 28.
9. A year ago I asked theological librarians (via the American Theological Library Association's unofficial listserve, Atlantis) for comments on the notion that in ten years a good seminary library would be spending fifty percent of its library materials budget on databases and other electronic sources, and the other fifty percent on traditional print sources. As pro-technology as most librarians are, no librarian on the list argued that it was realistic to expect that theological libraries to divide their money evenly between print and electronic formats. Theological books seem to have a future.





# Introduction

*Daniel O. Aleshire*

*Theological Education* has been published by The Association of Theological Schools for more than thirty-five years. Throughout these several decades, this journal has given attention to a wide range of practices in theological education, provided a forum for debate and reflection about issues in theological education, and documented the work of ATS and its member schools. This first issue of the 2000-2001 academic year reflects some changes and developments in this publication.

At its 2000 Biennial Meeting, the Association elected an Editorial Board to oversee the journal, to referee unsolicited manuscripts, and in consultation with ATS staff, to identify themes for future issues. The Editorial Board continues work begun by the ATS Communications Advisory Committee, which included *Theological Education* in its broader mandate to oversee all ATS publication and communication efforts. The future of this publication will be well-served by a board whose primary task is the quality and contribution of *Theological Education*.

With this issue, the editorial oversight has also changed. Nancy Merrill, ATS Director of Communications and Membership Services, has edited *Theological Education*, along with all the other publications ATS produces, for the past eight years. While she will continue to contribute to the journal as managing editor, Matthew Zyniewicz has assumed editorial responsibilities. He has been a member of the ATS staff since 1997, ably coordinating the three grant programs that ATS has offered to promote theological scholarship and enhance skill in teaching and learning. He is a B.A., M.Div., and Ph.D. graduate of the University of Notre Dame.

In the issues published in the 1999-2000 academic year, ATS introduced a slightly revised format that involves a set of articles related to a theme, and other articles that have been submitted for publication that are unrelated to the theme of the issue. *Theological Education* will continue to focus on a particular theme in each issue. For the most part, articles related to the theme are solicited by the Editorial Board or are written by individuals reporting on work undertaken by ATS committees and projects. In addition to the thematic articles, this and future issues of *Theological Education* will include articles refereed by the Editorial Board, articles drawn from presentations at ATS leadership education events and other meetings in order to make them more widely available, and brief articles in response to ideas advanced in previous issues. Articles related to practices and issues in theological education, as well as responses to articles that have been recently published, are welcome.

The theme of this issue is the *Public Character of Theological Education*. ATS began a project in 1998 to examine the public voice of theological schools, and

five articles in this issue report on the thinking that has been generated as part of this project. Robin Lovin and Richard Mouw, co-directors of the project, introduce issues and perspectives in their theme introduction, which is followed by four articles, written by different task groups, that have been seeking to understand the public character of theological education in four specific contexts: Mainline Protestant, Roman Catholic, Evangelical Protestant, and University-Related Divinity Schools. These articles provide a variety of insights, and raise important questions about theological schools and their public presence. The Public Character of Theological Education is one of the targeted areas of work adopted by the Association in the 2000 Biennial Meeting and will be a subject addressed in the 2002 Biennial Meeting.

In addition to the theme-related articles, this issue includes two articles from presentations at the fall 2000 Women in Leadership Conference: Diane Kennedy, O.P., Aquinas Institute of Theology, develops a contextual theology of leadership, and Emilie Townes, Union Theological Seminary, poetically articulates a womanist perspective on spirituality and leadership. Finally, this issue also contains a response about the several articles in the previous issue of *Theological Education* that identified the potential impact of technology for the future of theological education.

# Theme Introduction: The Public Character of Theological Education

*Robin W. Lovin and Richard J. Mouw*

Four essays in this issue of *Theological Education* represent the most extensive effort to date to understand the ways in which ATS member schools make their presence known in the churches, in their local communities, and among the wider public. The Public Character of Theological Education project, sponsored by ATS and funded by Lilly Endowment, began these studies. Participants in the project were divided into four working groups, drawn from mainline Protestant, evangelical Protestant, Roman Catholic, and university-related theological schools. Each group made assessments and recommendations based on the distinctive characteristics of its own type of school, and from their collective efforts a more comprehensive picture of the public presence of the theological school begins to emerge.

Perhaps the most striking learning from the working groups was the diversity of ways in which theological schools relate to the public. All members schools of The Association of Theological Schools adhere to shared standards that define theological education for them, and their faculties participate in academic disciplines that bring consistency to their scholarly work, but in the area of engagement with the public, ATS member schools respond to a wide variety of denominational requirements, institutional histories, and local experiences.

The working groups also discovered that, whatever the expectations for public presence, theological schools are not meeting them as well as they once did, or as well as they should be. In a world where many voices compete for public attention, theological schools are seldom heard. Their work is poorly understood, even in the churches and communities that are closest to them, and their potential contributions to understanding of the questions that engage the wider public remain largely unknown.

This is not because the schools themselves have sought an ivory tower isolation. No one regularly involved with North American theological schools would suppose that their work is limited to educating students and advancing scholarship. On any given day, the seminary is likely to host a variety of groups ranging from a denominational committee meeting for the purpose of drafting a policy statement to a local service club come to view the library's collection of historic Bibles. The school's administration interacts with a variety of local organizations and government officials in the course of everyday business, and students and faculty may become more visibly and vocally involved in controversial local issues. Faculty are often involved with an academic public that

## *Theme Introduction*

extends beyond theological studies, as they engage in interdisciplinary conversations with medicine, business, or law, or as their research requires expertise in sociology, psychology, or other human sciences. Other faculty become popular interpreters of the issues of the day, speaking at local forums, writing for church publications, or—much more rarely—making a brief appearance in the national media or contributing a quote to a journalist’s assessment of a major public question.

These activities may be less obvious than the meetings of classes or the traffic of students and faculty around the library circulation desk, but they are no less central to the identity of the theological school. Indeed, the ATS standards of accreditation regard this involvement with diverse publics, along with scholarly collaboration, freedom of inquiry, and global awareness, as four key characteristics of theological scholarship. Each accredited school shall, in the language of the standards, “assume responsibility for relating to the church, the academic community, and the broader public.”<sup>1</sup>

### **Public Presence and Public Theology**

The requirement for engagement with this diverse range of publics became part of the expectations for member schools with the adoption of the current standards of accreditation in 1996. James L. Waits, the former Executive Director of The Association of Theological Schools, began the project on the Public Character of Theological Education on the assumption that the implementation of this new standard would require the schools to be more explicit about their goals for their relationships with the church, academy, and wider public. It quickly became apparent, however, that the schools have the prior task of making themselves visible to the publics they hope to engage.

Theological schools often have a venerable history and landmark status in the places where they are located. Their founders may have been important in the community or may have held roles in the church that gave them regional or national recognition. Today’s leaders in theological education often assume that they have inherited this mantle of public awareness from earlier times when the church was a more important institution or the theological school was a more visible center of social activism. The evidence of recent studies, however, is that the profile of the theological school in public consciousness has been considerably diminished, often without the schools themselves realizing what has happened.

Elizabeth Lynn and Barbara Wheeler conducted studies of public perceptions in four cities in various parts of the country.<sup>2</sup> Interviews with community leaders showed limited awareness of theological schools and little understanding of what they do. The leadership of the schools was often unknown or regarded as ineffective in dealing with the community’s real issues. While some of this may reflect a more general decline in the prestige of churches and religious leaders, respondents who knew anything at all about the theological

schools often saw them as uninvolved by choice and isolated by their location or their architecture from the realities of the surrounding community.

Seminaries are virtually invisible to leaders of secular organizations and institutions, even those in the seminary's own city and region. "The seminaries don't appear often on people's radar screens," a community activist in a city with several seminaries told us. "I don't know that anyone in this town knows that [the seminaries] are there," said a businessman in the same city.<sup>3</sup>

To this problem of invisibility on the local level, we must add that the image of theological schools in the national media is increasingly specialized and remote from public issues. Faculty at ATS members schools are regularly sought out by reporters who want to talk about prayer, spirituality, or topics that are clearly and distinctly part of religious life. That, of course, is an important public outreach, but this attention to the obviously religious topics may obscure the fact that theological scholars are *not* often asked about developments in biotechnology, welfare policy, or environmental protection that have profound implications for moral and religious life. The proposal that led to the creation of the Public Character of Theological Education project noted the difference: "In matters purely religious, public media turn to the expertise of persons in theological schools for comment and analysis, but in matters that are not overtly religious, yet having profound religious and moral implications, the voices of theological schools are virtually silent." The proposal follows this observation with the obvious question: "How can the rich expertise of theological schools in the United States and Canada be more effective in addressing the theological dimensions of public issues and influencing the values of the society?"<sup>4</sup>

The irony is that theological schools are disappearing from public awareness just as religion in all of its manifestations has become a more obvious feature of public life. In place of the non-sectarian cultural homogeneity that eliminated all traces of particular religious identities from entertainment, news coverage, and civic events, we now have a renewed awareness of the variety of North American religious life. Observances of Ramadan take their place in the newspaper along with the major Jewish and Christian holidays. Mosques and Hindu temples dot the landscape alongside churches and synagogues, and representatives of all faiths comment on public issues and participate in public observances. The Public Religion Project, a large-scale study directed by Martin Marty, documented this growing presence of religion but gave no explicit attention to theological education as a part of religious life that relates to the wider public.<sup>5</sup>

This growing responsiveness to religion transcends confessional boundaries and gives rise to religious voices that can no longer be identified with the

## *Theme Introduction*

official pronouncements of recognized religious institutions. Many action groups in the public arena are motivated by religious convictions, but they are not directly accountable to church authorities. Individual public officials in the United States and Canada have taken pains in recent years to emphasize the religious foundations of their views on public policy, but they are equally insistent that these religious values do not correspond in any obvious way to the teachings of the religious bodies of which they are members.

Some theologians suggest that this growing public role for religion makes it possible to speak of a “public theology.” Rather than a shared “civil religion” that exists alongside the particular religious traditions to which North Americans belong, a public theology must be constructed *within* each tradition, weaving together the resources that allow its adherents to speak with conviction about justice and the human good in a pluralistic society.<sup>6</sup> This idea has attracted some attention in theological education, particularly in university-based theological schools,<sup>7</sup> but it quickly becomes apparent that creation of public theology is only one way in which ATS member schools are attempting to come to grips with the new situation in which they find themselves.

### **Varieties of Public Presence**

A theological school clearly needs something like a public theology if its public presence is to have integrity and connection to its mission and purpose. Otherwise, the engagement with the public may shrink to an exercise in public relations, aimed primarily at institutional advancement and unrelated to needs and issues beyond the institution. Constructing a public theology is an important step toward public presence, especially for schools with traditions that do not provide clear guidance in this area, or for ecumenical and nondenominational schools in which there is no one tradition that gives the institution a public voice.

A well-developed public theology alone, however, is no guarantee of effective public presence for the theological school. Roman Catholic theological schools in North America have a well-developed tradition that speaks to social and moral issues in a pluralistic society.<sup>8</sup> Both U.S. and Canadian Bishops’ Conferences have spoken out on controversial issues in ways that were deeply grounded in Catholic moral theology, yet addressed to the widest audience of concerned citizens. Yet Catholic schools seem to fare no better than others in the Auburn Center study when it comes to public visibility. In one memorable anecdote, the rector of a Roman Catholic seminary that is the only one in its state discovered that his congressman thought the seminary was a nursing home!<sup>9</sup>

The Roman Catholic working group in the Public Character project found that one of the most pressing issues is to make the well-developed tradition of Catholic public theology effective in the formation of a new generation of

priests and religious leaders. Seminarians today often appear to be motivated by a more individualized, spiritual understanding of pastoral ministry. Catholic schools are also concerned to integrate their visible, public role with the witness of other Catholic institutions. Diocesan seminaries, in particular, have to coordinate their engagement of the public with the teaching role of the local bishop and with his interpretation of the social witness of the universal Church. While the North American Catholic bishops have become perhaps the most effective, visible religious voices on matters of public policy, their effectiveness derives in part from a unified witness that may suffer if too many individuals and institutions are allowed to speak for it. How the seminaries can support the public witness of church leadership without simply submerging their own public identity in it is a challenge in every communion, but it is an issue that receives particular attention in the Roman Catholic theological schools.

Mainline Protestant schools, by contrast, are often forced to come to grips with a loss of public visibility and influence among their denominations. If a generation of Protestant theologians led by the Niebuhr brothers, John Bennett, and Gordon Harland once defined the public role of religion in North America, more recent literature conveys the implicit reproach that this liberal Protestant consensus in fact allowed the eclipse of religion in public life or its expulsion from the public square.<sup>10</sup> In addition, both the faculty and the student population in many mainline theological schools have become significantly more diverse, so that the close ties that once bound these institutions to their churches have in varying degrees weakened. The church itself may have to become a public to which the theological school needs to explain its purpose and its public mission.

The mainline Protestant working group found that the most pressing public agenda for many of these schools is to strengthen their connections to the denominational leaders who shape the public witness of their churches and who communicate about those issues with the church constituency and the wider public. They also discovered that after several decades of rapid political and cultural change, weary Protestant theological faculties often need to reconnect with the theology and spirituality that once gave energy and clarity to the Protestant witness. These sources are not necessarily in the distant past. They are remembered in the movements for peace and for civil rights that motivated many of the older generation of Protestant theological educators and church leaders to enter their vocations in the first place.

Evangelical Protestants face a somewhat different set of issues. In an era when mainline Protestantism enjoyed high prestige and public influence, evangelicals tended to distinguish themselves by emphasizing the priority of personal conversion over social transformation as the primary message of the church.<sup>11</sup> Many evangelical theological schools formed their institutional character in that era, and while evangelical social ethics has grown more diverse and complex, engagement with the wider public remains an issue. The evan-

## *Theme Introduction*

gical Protestant group's essay notes that ". . . the relationship between forgiveness, reconciliation, and new life in Christ, on the one hand, and social concern and action, on the other hand, continues to be unresolved. Though there may be few evangelicals who oppose a public involvement beyond proclamation, many sharply subordinate public presence to public witness." The highly visible development of evangelical political activism during the past decade has largely been the work of individuals and organizations that are independent of evangelical denominations and unrelated to evangelical theological education. Evangelical theologians and theological schools often are ambivalent about these developments, applauding the more visible presence of evangelical Christians in public life, but skeptical of some of the political agendas and tactics around which these movements have been built. As the declining prestige of mainline Protestantism has required mainline schools to redefine their public roles, so too the rising visibility and influence of evangelical social movements has complicated the efforts of many evangelical theological schools to think through the basis on which they might engage a public beyond their immediate constituencies.

The university-related theological schools are not immune from the social changes and pressures that the other three working groups discovered. University-related schools often benefit from the prestige and visibility of the institutions of which they are part. Their faculties are more likely to be sought out by the media than other theological educators, and their schools may be better known to the general public. This does not, however, always result in greater public understanding of their purpose. For these schools, preparation of professional clergy is usually only part of their educational task, and in some cases it is no longer the largest part. University divinity schools have never acquired the highly structured curricula and distinctive methods of teaching that characterize professional schools in law, medicine, and business. Their courses and their scholarship are likely to resemble graduate programs in the humanities, rather than the other professional schools on their campuses. While this can be an advantage for interdisciplinary inquiry, it increasingly raises the question of what distinctive purpose and subject matter justify the separate existence of a faculty of theology.<sup>12</sup> The engagement with "the academic community" mandated by statement 3.2.3.1 of the ATS standards may be a rather general task for the freestanding theological school. For the university-related schools, it often means a very specific engagement with the public constituted by their own universities, in which they must sharpen their definition of what they do and identify their specific contribution to discussions that will in any case go on in many other departments and disciplines. Their universities may enable them to engage a wider public more easily than their freestanding counterparts can do, but first, the school of theology must engage the university itself as a primary public.



## **Local Usefulness and Public Significance**

The four types of public presence delineated by the project's four working groups will be found in different combinations in the ATS member schools. A university-related school that has ties to a mainline Protestant denomination will experience issues derived from both relationships. Roman Catholic schools differ in important ways depending on whether they belong to a diocese, a religious order, or a Catholic university. Evangelical schools with strong denominational ties may find their experiences reflected in the mainline Protestant working group, as well as in the evangelical working group.

Each type of school and, indeed, each individual school faces a set of issues related to its visibility to a distinctive set of local constituencies. While these issues have something to do with the theological terms the school sets for its engagement with the public, they have more to do in most cases with the practical question of whether the theological school can make itself a useful partner with other individuals and agencies who shape its public image in the church and the wider community. It comes as something of a shock, particularly to theological schools that have an institutional memory of active participation in the civil rights movement, to learn that they are largely unknown to the leaders and advocates of the poor people who figure so prominently in the theological discourse in seminary classrooms. Too often, as one faculty member in the Auburn Center study put it, the outreach that theological schools do "involves people coming here, rather than us going to them."<sup>13</sup> It should come as no surprise, however, that the communities the theological school engages directly will view it through their own lenses, rather than in the terms set out in the school's theological self-understanding. Public presence on the local level depends heavily on readiness to "go to them," both intellectually and for real events where the faculty and students of the theological school can be a supportive presence.

Beyond the diversity of these local issues theological schools as a group must find ways to make a place in public awareness for their distinctive educational enterprise. The problem here is perhaps less the specific effect of a "culture of disbelief" that ignores religious activity than it is the result of a general increase in the volume and sophistication of claims on the public's interest. Presentations that would have been noticed a decade ago now fail to attract attention. Messages aimed at a generic audience are lost as people focus on web sites, specialized publications, and Internet chat rooms that seem to be designed just for them. Traditional religious organizations, typical congregations, and theological schools, in particular, may simply fall below the threshold of awareness.

What we have learned from the Public Character of Theological Education project suggests, however, that local and national news media may be important allies in solving this problem. A conference, sponsored by the project in

## *Theme Introduction*

October 1999, brought members of all four working groups together in Washington, DC, to meet with journalists from *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and PBS, as well as other media. The working journalists suggested that their editors are aware of the growing public interest in religion and eager to reach the specific audiences it attracts. Though theological schools often lack the professional news and information offices found in larger educational institutions, they can develop relationships that will make their activities and their faculties available to the media. Journalists at the conference had many suggestions about how to do this, but they did carry the common theme that the schools need to be responsive to queries from the media, rather than expecting press coverage to reflect the school's sense of what is important. Whether theological education appears to be a significant part of public life depends largely on whether the answers offered in the seminary classroom appear to connect with the questions that are asked by journalists and other members of the public beyond the campus gate.

The institutional and theological diversity of the ATS member schools is too broad for the Public Character project to design a single solution to these problems. Each school will have to develop its own response to the involvement with diverse publics mandated by section 3.2.3 of the ATS standards. Member schools will find resources for that task especially in the experience of other schools that share similar institutional characteristics and church connections, but also in the collective reflections of the range of schools represented in the essays in this issue. And certainly, neither the individual school nor the community of theological education generally can ignore the evidence that our work is not well understood, even among the neighbors who live closest to us and the constituents on whom we most depend.

## **Future Plans**

We hope that the essays in this issue of *Theological Education* will serve as a starting point for discussion in many schools. The studies developed by the working groups provide an overview against which an individual school may test its own experience. They also offer resources and constructive suggestions for future planning.

In the months ahead, the working groups will be developing the conclusions from their studies and supporting a series of demonstration projects that will suggest ways of putting their insights to work. Reports on these projects will be published in the spring 2002 issue of *Theological Education*, along with further suggestions for courses and curriculum development that strengthen the public contribution of theology and theological education.

The Public Character of Theological Education project will complete its work at the ATS Biennial Meeting in June 2002. The questions about the public role of theological schools will remain on the ATS agenda well beyond that date.

Robin W. Lovin is Dean of Perkins School of Theology Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas. Richard J. Mouw is President of Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. They are co-directors of the ATS Public Character of Theological Education project.

ENDNOTES

1. Standards of Accreditation, statement 3.2.3.1, in *Bulletin 44*, Part 1 (Pittsburgh: The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada, 2000), 59.
2. Elizabeth Lynn and Barbara G. Wheeler, *Missing Connections: Public Perceptions of Theological Education and Religious Leadership*, Auburn Studies, Number 6 (New York: Auburn Theological Seminary, 1999).
3. *Ibid.*, 4.
4. The Association of Theological Schools's proposal to Lilly Endowment for the initiative on the Public Character of Theological Education, 1997.
5. Martin E. Marty, with Jonathan Moore, *Politics, Religion, and the Common Good: Advancing a Distinctly American Conversation about Religion's Role in Our Shared Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000). On theological education and public religion, see Richard J. Mouw, "Public Religion, Through Thick and Thin," *Christian Century* 117 (June 7-14, 2000), 648.
6. Ronald F. Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology: The Church in a Pluralistic Culture* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991).
7. Conrad Cherry, *Hurrying Toward Zion: Universities, Divinity Schools, and American Protestantism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 282.
8. Michael J. Himes and Kenneth R. Himes, *Fullness of Faith: The Public Significance of Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993).
9. Lynn and Wheeler, 2.
10. Richard J. Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1984); Stephen Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).
11. Carl F. H. Henry, *Aspects of Christian Social Ethics* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1964).
12. Cherry, 268-87.
13. Lynn and Wheeler, 4.



# The Public Character of Theological Education: An Evangelical Perspective

*Principal writers for the Evangelical Protestant Study Group:*

*David Jones, Covenant Theological Seminary*

*Jeffrey Greenman, Tyndale Seminary*

*Christine Pohl, Asbury Theological Seminary*

*ABSTRACT: Evangelicalism is a renewal movement within historic orthodox Christianity characterized by a call to personal conversion, a high view of the authority of Scripture, a theology centered on the cross, and activism in evangelism and social concern. The public character of theological education in the evangelical tradition is manifest in the institutional ethos and practices of the theological school as well as in its curricular and co-curricular learning designs. To measure the effectiveness of a school's public character, a number of self-assessment questions are proposed relating to community presence and public witness.*

Accredited theological schools are institutions of higher learning that bear a public character in two ways: first, as social institutions located in certain communities, and secondly, through pursuing their mission to develop Christian leaders whose ministries will contribute to the public good. This article explores the implications of the public character of the theological school from an evangelical perspective. Our goal is to stimulate self-conscious institutional reflection on this aspect of theological education and to develop criteria that schools may find useful in the process of institutional self-evaluation.

## The Evangelical Context

Because the term *evangelical* simply derives from the New Testament word for the gospel, meaning that all Christian believers are by definition evangelical in the primary sense, a word of explanation is in order concerning its specialized use here and elsewhere in the Public Character Project. Martin Marty, in his ecumenically oriented book on *The Public Church: Mainline, Evangelical, Catholic*, provides a good concise definition: "By evangelical we mean those Protestants who stress the personal experience of conversion, the high authority of the Bible, and the mandate to evangelize others."<sup>1</sup> We take these distinctives to be characteristic strengths (rather than exclusive properties) of the evangelical tradition. Theological schools of all stripes are more or less evangelical according as these emphases are embraced and taught.

Among self-described evangelicals, David Bebbington's four-part analysis of evangelical priorities has quickly established itself as a standard point of reference.<sup>2</sup> Briefly stated, the "quadrilateral" proposed by Bebbington consists of the following components.

First, *conversionism*, "the belief that lives need to be changed" through a radical, supernatural work of the Holy Spirit (regeneration or the new birth). Evangelicals have emphasized a call to conversion, as persons "turn away from their sins in repentance and to Christ in faith." For this reason, a hallmark of evangelical preaching has been its evangelistic orientation. It is no accident that the world's most easily recognized evangelical, Billy Graham, is an evangelistic preacher. Not that evangelicals hold a patent on calls to a personal relationship with Christ. Take the following example: "Who is a true Christian? Not just someone who is baptized or confirmed or who goes to Mass: rather it is someone who has embraced Christ in the depths of his heart and expresses this by acting in a Christian spirit." Substitute "goes to church" for "goes to Mass" and you have a statement that could easily pass for Whitefield or Wesley. In fact it pre-dates them by more than 200 years.<sup>3</sup>

Second, *activism*, by which Bebbington means "the expression of the gospel in effort" as believers are further sanctified by the Spirit working by and with the word. This activist bent is expressed both in evangelism and in social concern. A firm belief in the necessity of conversion provides the impetus for evangelicals to seek to "share their faith" with everyone who has not yet "received" Christ. This conviction fosters various forms of evangelistic activism, including one-on-one evangelism, outreach ministries to those seeking faith, and energetic missionary involvement as the gospel message of salvation is preached around the globe.

In addition, evangelicals—John Wesley's opposition to slavery being a notable example—have understood that the gospel has moral, social, political, and economic implications. Evangelical social activism is evident in such works as that of William Wilberforce in the abolition of slavery, Lord Shaftesbury's involvement in social reform, the humanitarian relief and development work of World Vision, the concern for justice for the poor by Evangelicals for Social Action led by Ron Sider, Charles Colson's pioneering work in prison ministry and prison reform, and John Perkins's holistic Christian Community Development Association.

The third characteristic, *biblicism*, refers to the particularly high regard for the Bible as "God's word written." Evangelicals look to Scripture as the supreme authority for faith, the primary source for shaping their theology and nurturing their spiritual growth. While evangelicals subscribe to various approaches to biblical interpretation, the biblicism provides a broad expanse of common ground and a distinctive ethos shared by the evangelical movement.

Finally, *crucicentrism*, by which Bebbington means an emphasis on the doctrine of the cross as the focus of the gospel and "the fulcrum of a theological

system.” For most evangelicals, conversionism is grounded theologically in an affirmation of Christ’s atoning death on the cross as a substitute for sinful humankind. Support for a doctrine of substitutionary atonement remains standard for evangelicals, though with increasing frequency integrated with other biblical themes. Gratitude for Christ’s death provides a compelling motivation for sanctification.

The Bebbington quadrilateral is useful for historical orientation, though doubtless it may be improved upon in various respects. In particular, John Stott adds theological coherence by developing the evangelical essentials in a Trinitarian framework, expounding the *evangelion* of “the revealing initiative of God the Father, the redeeming work of God the Son and the transforming ministry of God the Holy Spirit.”<sup>4</sup>

As evangelicals we are conscious of four conditioning dynamics that surround our engagement with “public character” issues. First, we recognize that evangelicalism is a diverse movement.<sup>5</sup> Rather than being monolithic, it is more like a coalition or umbrella, held together by a core set of agreements, practices, and a common ethos. There are evangelicals within mainline Protestant denominations, as well as millions found within self-consciously evangelical denominations. There are some groups, such as fundamentalists, Mennonites, Pentecostals, and many African-American Protestants, that may not refer to themselves as evangelicals, yet share a great deal more in common with evangelicals than with non-evangelical Protestants. Moreover, evangelical diversity is evident in any discussion of issues surrounding the “public character” of Christianity. There are unmistakable differences of theological emphasis within the evangelical camp, which includes Reformed, Calvinist, and Kuyperian approaches; Wesleyans and those associated with the holiness movements; Mennonites or Anabaptists; voices on the evangelical left as well as the evangelical right; conservative and dispensationalist evangelicals; Pentecostals as well as evangelicals whose pneumatologies could be charismatic, non-charismatic, or even anti-charismatic.

Second, we are conscious that evangelicals have a heritage that should be explored seriously and appropriated critically. There are evangelical exemplars whose views and actions can become valuable resources with regard to issues of “public character” and social involvement. Too often evangelicals are unaware of their own history. Beyond justly famous figures such as Wilberforce and Shaftesbury, it is worthwhile for evangelicals to consider what might be learned from Elizabeth Fry, a central figure in prison reform in Victorian England, or from evangelical leadership in the abolitionist movement in America.

Third, we want to affirm the strengths of the evangelical movement, beyond the heritage already mentioned. At its best, evangelicalism should foster a confidence in the gospel’s ability to transform individual lives and shape society, should cultivate a high level of moral commitment and social

responsibility, should embrace the global dimensions of the church's "public witness" on account of its commitment to world mission, should generate congregational ministry and community involvement to meet specific needs of local communities, and should provide a theological vision that holds together the ongoing proclamation of the gospel with active social concern.

Lastly, we believe there are weaknesses in the contemporary evangelical movement that pose significant obstacles to the authentic expression of Christianity's "public character" by evangelicals. An awkward tendency toward triumphalism and too-frequent attitudes of superiority toward non-evangelical Christians suggest that evangelicals place more confidence in themselves than is warranted. These dynamics sometimes make it difficult for evangelicals to listen to alternative voices and to learn valuable lessons from others. Another obstacle to public engagement is the evangelical tendency either to embrace *withdrawal* from the world (seeing it as wholly malevolent) or to adopt an uncritical *accommodation* to dominant cultural values (seeing the world as entirely benign). The latter tendency is evident in the ways that evangelicals have been shaped powerfully by the cultural forces of individualism, materialism, and privatization, as well as our widespread acceptance of the "corporate management" model of pastoral leadership, often combined with an embrace of a therapeutic model of ecclesial ministry. At the level of congregational practice, too often evangelicals have divorced evangelism and social concern, unwisely adopting an "either/or" rather than a "both/and" approach. At the level of theological reflection evangelicalism has not yet developed a mature and comprehensive vision for the church's engagement in witness to Christ in every sphere of society.

According to our analysis, "public character" embodies two related but distinct concerns, typically distinguished as "public presence" (referring to civic involvement) and "public voice" (referring to theological interpretation of culture and events). In our article these concerns are addressed respectively as *community presence* and *public witness*. We find it necessary to make another distinction between the public character of the theological school simply by "being there" (institutional ethos) and the public character of the theological school in its "doing its thing" (theological learning through curricular and co-curricular means).

### **Institutional Ethos and Practices**

Theological schools, though established, funded, and controlled by particular groups for self-determined purposes, nevertheless exist as social institutions within human communities. From this situatedness naturally devolve both community responsibilities and opportunities for community service that accord with the specific mission and character of the institution as a theological school.



“The church has the task of being a new order of life, liberation, healing and salvation in the world. It cannot be just another social institution, it must be a new social reality presenting an alternative way of life.”<sup>6</sup> While a seminary is not strictly speaking a church, it is an organized Christian community and as such is called to missional engagement with the surrounding culture. All the more reason for Christian institutions, being physically and socially situated in a community, to take responsibility for being a good neighbor within that given network of associations and connections.

Surely a major reason why secular leaders do not view seminaries as community assets is that seminary leaders themselves have not understood their institutions as being called to engagement with community issues and service to community needs. Yet, for several reasons an institution’s engagement with its social context is very important. In preparing students for ministry the institution’s practices provide living models, a laboratory within which students can learn how an institution should relate to its context. An important, though subtle, aspect of student formation comes from the models that the seminary itself offers.<sup>7</sup> In addition, the seminary as a significant community presence should be a responsible member of the larger community.

The seminary experience is a significant time of character formation for students. “To be a responsible person is to find one’s role in the building of shalom, the re-webbing of God, humanity, and all creation in justice, harmony, fulfillment, and delight.”<sup>8</sup> Much of what students learn comes from what they see modeled by the institution that seeks to be shaping them for ministry. Seminaries need to look closely at their institutional ethos and its formative impact on a student’s present and future church practice. Several organizing questions may help in consideration of these issues.

### ***Community Presence (Civic Involvement)***

1. Does the seminary articulate and embody a normative understanding of how a Christian institution should relate to the world? For example, is there some attention to this concern in the institution’s mission and purpose statement?

2. Do the seminary’s institutional practices and relations suggest how a Christian institution should relate to other institutions?

3. In classes, chapel, campus activities, and prayer times, what is said about the church’s relation to civil society? For example, is public prayer offered regularly about national events, international concerns, and local civic issues.<sup>9</sup>

4. In what ways are staff and faculty involved in civic affairs? In particular, for what behaviors and practices does the seminary reward its faculty? Is community involvement an asset in tenure and promotion review? What involvement in community institutions and projects do faculty persons model as well as teach?<sup>10</sup>

*The Public Character of Theological Education: An Evangelical Perspective*

5. Where in the life of the seminary community do students learn skills for civic involvement? For example, are there opportunities to learn/practice organizational skills for leading or developing community events, programs, etc.?

6. A community, town, or city should be better because a seminary is located there. A few questions a school might want to ask are:

- a. Are families healthier because of the seminary's presence and activities?
- b. Are voluntary associations, local schools, and clubs stronger because of the seminary?
- c. Are people in need better off because of the seminary?
- d. What is the seminary like as an employer—how does it treat local people who are its employees?
- e. What is the seminary like as a tenant, landlord, or land owner?
- f. How do its various offices (maintenance, business, food service, etc.) relate to vendors and to the larger community?

There is a risk that in calling attention to a seminary's contributions to the community within which it is located, the tone can become self-congratulatory. The virtue of Christian humility reminds us that self-examination is for the purpose of disciplined improvement in love, responsibility, and neighborliness.

***Public Witness (Public Voice)***

1. Are there formal and informal settings on campus within which contested public/moral issues can be addressed? Is dissent permitted? Is conversation about issues encouraged? Are there efforts on campus to understand differing viewpoints in addition to critiquing them?

2. What are the forums for interpreting public life to the seminary community? To the church? To the public?

3. Are faculty members encouraged to participate in civic dialogue? How does the seminary administration/board respond to public statements by faculty about public concerns? What is the impact of various constituencies of the seminary on its public voice?

4. Are faculty and administrators called on or free to give interpretation of moral/public events and issues? Do faculty members see themselves as interpreters of cultural and social concerns?

5. Does the school and its faculty have helpful relations with local media (television, radio, newspapers)? Are representatives of the school available for interpretive comments about current issues?<sup>11</sup>

6. Does public witness extend beyond the most highly contested issues? Is there attention to local, regional, national, and global social and moral concerns?

*The Public Character of Theological Education: An Evangelical Perspective*

In the course of our reflection on public character issues, a number of institutional stories were shared that may serve as concrete examples of community presence and public witness.

**Community presence.** The Church of God School of Theology serves the community in which it is located by providing health care, tutoring, and counseling services. Tyndale Seminary aims to maintain a program in English as a Second Language for the local community. In its small community Asbury Theological Seminary is one of the two dominant institutions. It has contributed land and resources for a public park. Over several years, personnel from Dallas Theological Seminary have worked behind the scenes as peacemakers and conciliators in meetings between city officials and neighborhood representatives over the establishment of a new major thoroughfare involving property purchases for demolition and other disruptions.

Sometimes the positive presence of a theological school may be taken for granted on the part of the wider community. In a sense, that is as it should be. Jesus wants us to let our light shine so people can see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven, but he doesn't want us to go out and hire public relations trumpeters to make sure folks are looking. When Canadian Theological Seminary announced its move from Regina to Calgary, their unheralded positive presence in the community became manifest as public officials expressed their appreciation and sense of loss to the community of a significant institutional community good.

**Public witness.** Asbury's faculty member in biomedical ethics is regularly called on by local print and broadcast media to help interpret complex current issues in the field of bioethics. Covenant Theological Seminary has established the Francis Schaeffer Institute to bring focus to its efforts to connect faith and life. In recent years the Institute has sought to engage the culture through a program of open public lectures in area bookstores. A speaker (local university professor, artist, musician, or Covenant Seminary professor or student) addresses a relevant topic for thirty to forty-five minutes, followed by an extended question and answer period. The audiences are quite diverse, including store patrons, high school students, clergy, lay people, and seminary students. Sample topics have included "The Argument for Intelligent Design," "A History of Courtship," "The Genocidal Century," "Must We Be Committed in order to Know?" and "The Dr. Laura Phenomenon."

Evangelical schools represented at the 2000 ATS Biennial Meeting were invited to contribute other stories. Columbia Biblical Seminary and Graduate School of Missions responded by sending their resolution (below) on removal of the Confederate flag from the South Carolina capitol, adopted in 1997 before the issue became a national *cause célèbre* in the United States:<sup>12</sup>

**A Resolution of Support  
for Racial Reconciliation and Harmony  
in South Carolina  
(February 1997)**

Whereas, the Bible teaches that from the one couple created in His image, God made every race and culture of humankind to inhabit the earth (Genesis 1:26-28; Acts 17:26), and

Whereas, Christ and His followers in their lives and teachings modeled and proclaimed a good news for all humankind, regardless of race or ethnicity (Matthew 28:18-20; Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11), and

Whereas, Christ's followers are called to be peacemakers, promoting racial reconciliation (Matthew 5:9; Ephesians 2:11-22), and

Whereas, Columbia International University seeks to teach and model harmony in an ethnically diverse community of worship, study, and service, and

Whereas, many of our political leaders have taken a courageous and positive initiative in promoting racial harmony in South Carolina in the call for the moving of the Confederate Battle flag from atop the Statehouse,

Therefore, the undersigned faculty, staff and administration of Columbia International University declare our support for all efforts which forward racial reconciliation and harmony in the state. We fully recognize that moving the flag is a symbolic gesture and may not in itself bring the citizens of South Carolina together in the bonds of love. However, we challenge ourselves and our fellow citizens to let this gesture be the first of many that will make our great and diverse state a model of unity and goodwill to the nation.

To this resolution we attach our names.

Doubtless there are many other stories of public witness to be told. Columbia provides a helpful example in that it takes the lead in addressing a public issue for the common good from its distinctive, evangelical perspective and mission.

## **Curricular and Co-curricular Issues**

While theological schools exist as social institutions within particular human communities, they are also typically established as institutions of theological learning and ministerial formation to provide leadership for specific constituencies in fulfillment of the divine mission of redemption (*missio dei*). It is reductionistic, however, to conceive of this in terms of the dominant paradigm of “clerical” ministerial training, understood as preparing congregational leaders to perform “care-taking” and “in-house” functions within the church. As important as such pastoral training is, the broader task of the theological school is to educate and equip men and women for creative, faithful engagement in the world.<sup>13</sup> Seminaries should embrace a “missional” paradigm that seeks to prepare leaders to form communities that equip the whole people of God to use their gifts in various forms of Christian service so that each person participates in God’s mission to the world.

The notion of the “missional church” views the church in dynamic rather than static terms.<sup>14</sup> The whole people of God are called into God’s service, to use the gifts they have received from the Holy Spirit as faithful servants and witnesses to the lordship of Jesus Christ. The whole people of God are sent into the whole world—every corner of the world, and every sphere of society—as a sign, foretaste, and instrument of the coming Kingdom of God. An important implication of this basic ecclesiological commitment is that being a Christian entails living a life of “public character.” Concern for the “public witness” of the gospel, and for the “public presence” of Christians, is neither an alien imposition, nor an extraneous diversion. Rather, such concerns are essential to authentic Christian discipleship, which is a following after Christ into the world.

Renewed concerns for our “public witness” and our “public character” suggest the need for seminaries to re-examine the focus and content of their academic offerings, ministerial preparation, and formation. The formation of students toward authentic Christian discipleship that engages the world involves processes of enculturation or *paideia*. Such processes call for intentional engagement of the whole person toward a vision of “the good.” In order for seminaries to form students whose lives exhibit a vision of “the good” within the public arena, attention should be paid to the school’s total ethos as it influences the lives of students. Beyond course offerings, careful notice should be given to the ritual life of the school, the contact students have with role models, and their involvement in interpersonal relations.

The social transformation implied in the biblical ideal of “the good” (expressed alternatively as *shalom* or *tikkun*) involves three components: personal renewal, ecclesial practice, and structural reform. The community presence aspect of the public character of theological education is fulfilled in part through attentiveness to personal renewal and ecclesial practice, that is, the

embodiment in the institutional ethos of God's will for human beings living in community. It also involves curricular attention to the theological issues of soteriology and ecclesiology that lie behind such renewal and practice, and strategies for their communication and implementation. Both are critically relevant to the public good.

The issue of structural reform, undertaken in the light of theological interpretation of culture and events and analysis of contemporary ethical issues, does not exhaust the public witness aspect of the character of theological education as the Pentecostal experience in particular indicates.

Pentecostal conversion, while being personal, is not simply an individual experience, but also a communal one. In the life of the community, Pentecostals have found a new sense of dignity and purpose in life. Their solidarity creates affective ties, giving them a sense of equality. These communities have functioned as social alternatives that protest against the oppressive structures of the society at large. Along with some social critics, Pentecostals have discovered that effective social change often takes place at the communal and micro-structural level, not at the macro-structural level.<sup>15</sup>

We suggest some organizing questions to guide theological schools in assessing their ability to form students who are engaged as Christians in the world. These questions are clustered around the categories of community presence and public witness.

### ***Community Presence***

1. Where in the curriculum are concerns addressed for a world-engaging Christian discipleship? Are they addressed in core courses across the curriculum? Are they a focus of any particular class (required or elective)? Are there specific courses in church and society, Christianity and culture, church and state? How does the school understand the relation between Christian mission/evangelism and community presence?

2. Is there sensitivity to teaching about community presence and engagement with international students whose settings and opportunities may be quite different from the North American environment?

3. Do faculty teach, model, and mentor in these areas?

4. Are persons engaged in civic affairs invited to campus to lecture? Conduct workshops? Speak in chapel?

5. Where in the curriculum do students learn to help their congregations with vocational issues? Where do students learn to bring a Christian world view to the marketplace, professions, family, education, etc.?

6. How does the curriculum support those students whose call is to ministry within the various professions or marketplace? Where do they learn

skills for understanding their moral, social, and spiritual responsibility in those settings?

7. For faculty, questions about community presence/civic involvement might intersect with:

- a. Issues surrounding faculty workloads.
- b. Issues related to the focus of faculty research and publication.
- c. Faculty development/in service training issues.
- d. Diversity/profile of faculty itself.
- e. Faculty travel and teaching at theological schools in the Two-Thirds World.

### ***Public Witness***

In a discussion meeting with some two dozen young evangelicals holding public arena jobs in the nation's capital, Richard Mouw saw three dominant questions emerge: "First, how should we see our involvement in public life as flowing from our identity as members of the Body of Christ? Second, to what degree can we expect success in our efforts to promote public righteousness during this time when we still await the return of Christ? Third, what is the proper mode of public discourse for Christians who are immersed in the 'thickness' of Christian convictions?" These Mouw identifies, respectively, as questions of ecclesiology, eschatology, and (ethical) epistemology.<sup>16</sup>

Clearly these questions belong on the evangelical theological school's agenda. Scripture says, "Wisdom calls aloud in the street; she raises her voice in the public squares" (Prov. 1:20). In the book of Proverbs, God's covenant name, Yahweh, is invoked about ninety times, most memorably in the phrase, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Prov. 1:7, 9:10, 15:33; cf. Psa. 111:10 where the phrase occurs in the context of God's redemptive covenant). The gospel of God's saving grace in Jesus Christ calls men and women to be public witnesses to the coming of the kingdom of God. While Christian ethics is not wholly discontinuous with the basic principles of common morality, its main concern is to articulate a distinctive way of life arising out of biblical revelation and the incarnation of the Son of God (Heb. 1:1-2).

God's people are a royal priesthood, set apart for faithful witness and sent forth as participants in God's own mission of redemption and transformation of the world. This constitutes the people of God as a missionary people, gathered into community life to be commissioned, empowered, and sent out to represent the reign of God in every aspect of life and every corner of the world. Missional ecclesiology implies that disengagement from public witness and social involvement constitutes more than a "missed opportunity," as the secular leaders in the Lynn-Wheeler study observed.<sup>17</sup> More disturbingly, disengagement from public life actually expresses a scaled-down gospel and a misunderstanding of the nature and mission of the church. The lack of public presence of seminaries signals the need to mobilize God's people as faithful witnesses to the reign of God in every area of life.

## *The Public Character of Theological Education: An Evangelical Perspective*

We offer the following organizing questions to assess the theological school's public witness:

1. In preaching classes, how are questions of public witness addressed? Is preaching taught in a way that helps students to connect the Word with contemporary social and moral concerns?
2. What are the forms of faculty public witness? Do faculty members speak primarily to the church, public, or guild about public concerns?
3. How does the institution, administration, or faculty address current issues both for the sake of the public community and for the seminary community itself? What are the forums for interpreting public life to the public? To the seminary community? To the church?
4. Are students encouraged and given opportunities to participate in public witness, e.g., justice projects, internships in public arenas?
5. Is the institution concerned for a broad range of issues? Does it transcend the usual, high-visibility political topics?
6. Is the institution conscious of (and comfortable with) the variety of viewpoints within itself and its constituency? Is discussion about and exchange between these viewpoints fostered both officially and unofficially?
7. Does the seminary curriculum identify and instruct in the appropriate use of the various modes of public witness: announcement, instruction, rebuke, interpretation, exhortation, commendation, invitation?
8. Do the school's publications contain articles that relate to public issues?
9. Are alumni who are involved in public witness affirmed as models?

### **Conclusions**

As Os Guinness observes, the evangelical church in the United States oscillates between two relationships to the prevailing culture—withdrawal or attempted domination.<sup>18</sup> Consideration of the public character of the church and of theological education should remind evangelicals how mistaken such a dichotomy is. For the sake of the gospel, we must accept our role as ambassadors of Christ to the world, not only to proclaim the gospel and to make disciples of all peoples, but also to embody the love and mercy of our incarnate Savior who had compassion on the multitudes and so fed them as well as taught them.

In many sectors of conservative evangelicalism, the specter of the social gospel fosters a lingering suspicion of a slippery slope. The furor that greeted John Stott's *Christian Mission in the Modern World*<sup>19</sup> has abated, but in significant sectors of evangelicalism the relationship between forgiveness, reconciliation, and new life in Christ, on the one hand, and social concern and action, on the other hand, continues to be unresolved. Though there may be few evangelicals who oppose a public involvement beyond proclamation, many sharply subordinate public presence to public witness.



Evangelical seminaries exercise a crucial role in training leaders for the future of the church worldwide.<sup>20</sup> In some places, such as Guatemala and some other Latin American countries, Pentecostal evangelicals will soon become the majority. They thus face staggering opportunities and sobering responsibilities. While the church in North America struggles to adjust to its increasingly marginal status, learning to live as exiles, without the privileges of cultural establishment, our sisters and brothers elsewhere face quite different challenges. When North American evangelical theological education addresses public character issues, it must do so in light of these widely divergent circumstances around the world. Those who assume places of power in their societies can be aided by the painful lessons learned from misusing such influence in our culture.

As evangelicals, a continuing danger is that we will accept our call to minister to the world across the sea or beyond our borders, but overlook the service that we can render in Christ's name in our cities and our neighborhoods. Although evangelicals compose a sizable majority of overseas missionaries, which creates its own responsibilities for public character, this does not relieve us of the privilege of sharing the love of Christ with those at the doorstep of our churches and seminaries. Theological education should foster a creative mindset in students, faculty, administration, and staff that seeks ways to care for those in need and to foster well-being among those who image the triune God.

Evangelicals also face the continuing tensions between the responsibilities of public witness and the pressure from donors and constituencies to accommodate to particular social and political values. Seminaries are called to represent the Lord who scandalized the established religious powers and to represent the churches and individuals whose prayers and sacrificial giving make possible theological education. We should combine responsible prophetic stances toward cultural issues with ongoing education of our constituency, journeying with them to increasing maturity in Christ. The prerequisite of such education is both the humility to listen to others as well as the courage to challenge them.

As evangelicals reject the temptation to withdraw from their public responsibilities, we also face the temptation to be uncivil in our participation. Civility issues remain large on our agenda, as we struggle to avoid an unbiblical relativism toward sin, but also insist on a Christ-like graciousness toward all, perhaps especially toward those with whom we differ.<sup>21</sup> For some evangelicals, "civility" smacks of political correctness, moral indulgence, or a failure of nerve. Our Lord's command to love our neighbor and the Pauline injunctions to speak the truth in love and to season our speech surely indicates that firm convictions do not require harsh, loveless polemics. The public witness and the public presence of those who identify themselves by the evangel surely must embody its mercy and grace as well as its truth and holiness.

### **Note on the Committee and Its Work**

Since the inaugural meeting in September 1998, the evangelical group met four times, twice with outside speakers for perspective. Dean Trulear, vice president of Public/Private Ventures, addressed the meeting on April 9-10, 1999, and Gary Haugen, founder and president of International Justice Mission, on October 6-7, 1999. The third meeting, March 31-April 1, 2000, was devoted to a preliminary draft of this article for *Theological Education* and preparation for a presentation of the project to evangelical representatives at the ATS Biennial Meeting in June 2000. The study group met finally on October 4-5, 2000, to present its work to the members of the other study groups and the project's advisory committee.

The six institutions represented in the study group provide a reasonable cross-section of North American evangelicalism. The church traditions of the individual group members are similarly diverse: African-American, Anglican, Baptist, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, and Wesleyan.

*Members of the evangelical Protestant group include: David Jones, chair, Covenant Theological Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri; Cheryl Bridges Johns, Church of God School of Theology, Cleveland, Tennessee; Jeffrey Greenman, Tyndale Seminary, Toronto, Ontario; H. Malcolm Newton, Denver Seminary, Denver, Colorado; Christine Pohl, Asbury Theological Seminary, Wilmore, Kentucky; and Stephen Spencer, Dallas Theological Seminary, Dallas, Texas.*

### ENDNOTES

1. Martin E. Marty, *The Public Church: Mainline, Evangelical, Catholic* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 13. In Marty's view, the three branches are a "communion of communions."
2. D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1989), 1-19. See also David Bebbington, "Evangelicalism in Its Settings: The British and American Movements since 1940," *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles, and Beyond, 1700-1900*, ed. Mark A. Noll et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 365-88.
3. The source is Erasmus, *The Education of a Christian Prince* (1516), trans. Neil M. Cheshire and Michael J. Heath, ed. Lisa Jardine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 18.
4. John R.W. Stott, *Evangelical Truth: A Personal Plea for Unity, Integrity, and Faithfulness* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 25.
5. Cf. Gabriel J. Fackre, *Ecumenical Faith in Evangelical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1993). Fackre, in this irenic and accurate treatise, distinguishes six varieties of modern evangelicals: Fundamentalists, Old Evangelicals, New Evangelicals, Justice and Peace Evangelicals, Charismatic Evangelicals, and Ecumenical Evangelicals (22-23). To this list should probably be added Confessing Evangelicals, an association of which has been formed subsequent to the publication of Fackre's book.
6. H. Malcolm Newton, "On the Moral Responsibility of Christian Leaders in the Age of Crack," *Body of Christ News* (November 1995), 12.

*The Public Character of Theological Education: An Evangelical Perspective*

7. While the ATS standards for this are listed under Learning (3.1.1) rather than Involvement with Diverse Publics (3.2.3), it seems important to pay attention to how institutional ethos and practices contribute to student learning with respect to community presence and public witness.
8. Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995), 197.
9. Cf. Jer. 29:7, "Seek the welfare (*shalom*) of the city where I have sent you . . . and pray to the Lord on its behalf"; 1 Tim. 2:1-2, "I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions."
10. Cf. Tit. 3:1, where being "ready for every good work" in context refers to preparedness for civic responsibility; significantly Heb. 11:33 selects for special commendation those who *through faith administered justice* (NIV).
11. A helpful brochure by Mark Silk on "A Religion Scholar's Guide to Dealing with the News Media" is available from the American Academy of Religion (aar@emory.edu).
12. It should be noted that while Columbia regrettably did observe the Jim Crow laws for many years, it was nevertheless the first school of higher education in South Carolina to desegregate.
13. Cf. Robert Banks, *Reenvisioning Theological Education: Exploring a Missional Alternative to Current Models* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999).
14. Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999).
15. "Evangelization, Proselytism and Common Witness: The Report from the Fourth Phase of the International Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and Some Classical Pentecostal Churches and Leaders (Vatican City: The Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, 1999), par. 43.
16. Richard J. Mouw, "Evangelical Ethics in the Time of God's Patience: Recovering Some Recently Neglected Themes," in *Where Shall My Wond'ring Soul Begin? The Landscape of Evangelical Piety and Thought*, eds. Mark A. Noll and Ronald F. Thiemann (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000).
17. Elizabeth Lynn and Barbara G. Wheeler, "Missing Connections: Public Perceptions of Theological Education and Religious Leadership," *Auburn Studies*, No. 6 (September 1999), 1-16.
18. Os Guinness, *America's Hour: A Time of Reckoning and the Once and Future Role of Faith* (New York: Free Press, 1993).
19. John R.W. Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1975).
20. Other examples of such training include the Langham Trust founded by John Stott, which funds libraries and advanced theological education for pastors and church leaders in the Two-Thirds World.
21. See further Richard Mouw, *Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992).



# The Public Character of Theological Education: A Perspective from Roman Catholic Schools of Theology and Seminaries

*Principal writers for the Roman Catholic Study Group:*

*Jeremiah J. McCarthy, St. John's Seminary*

*William Morell, O.M.I., Oblate School of Theology*

*William McGrattan, St. Peter's Seminary*

*Daniel McLellan, O.F.M., Washington Theological Union*

*Kevin O'Neil, C.Ss.R., Washington Theological Union*

*ABSTRACT: This article situates the public character of a Roman Catholic theological school within the framework of significant theological themes drawn from the Catholic tradition. After highlighting the mission of the Church, the understanding of sacramentality, a communal anthropology, its harmonious vision of the role of the state and society, the tradition affirms that all theology of its nature is "public" in character and not a sectarian exercise. The authors invoke a distinction between "internal" aspects of a seminary program (ad intra) and "external" relationships (ad extra) and make suggestions in each of these areas for the benefit of the schools. The article also recognizes the distinctive locations and diverse missions of Catholic theological schools. While some schools focus exclusively on the formation of priests, others have mixed populations of lay and ordination candidates. Irrespective of differences in ethos and mission, the authors judge that the insights and suggestions of the essay will benefit all schools as they assess their response to the challenge of theological education and its public character.*

## Introduction and Context

In his justly famous book, *Christ and Culture*,<sup>1</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr developed a theological typology of the relationship between the affairs of the believing Christian community ("Christ") and the affairs of the secular world ("Culture"). Niebuhr identified several construals of the relationship ranging from an identification with the culture to sectarian opposition to the culture. Sandwiched between these extremes are historically modulated adjustments and accommodations, but clearly, Niebuhr's preferred approach for the Church's relationship to the world was neither accommodationist nor adversarial, but "transformative." While "in" the world, but not "of" it, the Church is called to

*The Public Character of Theological Education:  
A Perspective from Roman Catholic Schools of Theology and Seminaries*

exercise its role to “redeem” or “transform” the world by engagement and not through sectarian withdrawal. Whether or not one agrees with Niebuhr’s elegant template in any part or all of its architecture, it is clear that the question of church and world, or the relationship of communities of faith to the realm of “public” action and discourse, is an ongoing and persistent challenge for the church.

In this context, the report of the Auburn Center highlighting the problem of the lack of “visibility” of the theological school in shaping debate on issues of public policy is an important contribution to this critical conversation for the Church and its ministerial leadership. As Richard Neuhaus has astutely observed in his volume, *The Naked Public Square*,<sup>2</sup> the absence of the theological voice, by accident or design, is an impoverishment that harms robust debate and deprives the “public square” of a rich resource of values and insights essential to a just and responsible social order. Though the question is not new, the fact that The Association of Theological Schools has made this issue of the role of seminaries and the “public character” of theological education an integral element in the process of accreditation and evaluation is, indeed, a significant and new emphasis for sustained and careful consideration by the Church and its theological resources.

As a constituency within the community of theological schools, Roman Catholic seminaries and schools of theology bring distinctive contributions to this question of the “public character” of theological education. Ministerial leadership in the Catholic community is no longer the exclusive prerogative of ordained, celibate men. The Second Vatican Council underscored the rich theology of baptism as the foundational reality for all ministry in the Church. Far from threatening or undermining the distinctive and priceless role of ordained priesthood, conciliar theology recovered the distinctive voice of the baptized faithful, men and women, and viewed the relationship of the laity and the ordained as “mutually ordered one to the other.” Thus, the setting and shape of theological training for priests and laity has been dramatically altered since the Council closed in 1965. The Council mandated the renewal of priestly training and each national conference of Bishops was charged with the task of adapting the basic “blueprint” (known as the *Ratio Fundamentalis* [normative structure or “order”] for seminary renewal) to the local setting.

The American Bishops responded by crafting the *Program of Priestly Formation* (PPF), now in its fourth edition and soon to be revised in a fifth edition. This document retained the traditional “freestanding” seminary model. In this model, all aspects of priestly formation (spiritual, intellectual, pastoral, and human) are conducted in a self-contained setting. However, other approaches, such as theological consortia, or theological unions that include the training of lay ecclesial ministers along with priesthood candidates, were also affirmed.

*The Public Character of Theological Education:  
A Perspective from Roman Catholic Schools of Theology and Seminaries*

Even the “freestanding” seminary has changed from an exclusive, quasi-monastic environment, to an “open” setting requiring collaboration with lay women and lay men as constitutive for solid pastoral, priestly formation.

The texture of Catholic ministerial formation, then, is multifaceted and complex. Professional training of lay ministers is grounded in a theological conviction rooted in baptism, and, by no means, a personnel management strategy designed to offset a perceived shortage in ordained priests. Responding to the “public character” of theology in the context of Catholic life and thought must reflect the diverse setting and mission of each school, but it is also clear that lay ministers and ordained ministers must be mutually schooled in appropriating and responding to the public role of theology. In developing this reflection for the benefit of Catholic schools within ATS, care has been given to include not only the perspective of “freestanding” schools, but also the perspective of those theological schools whose constituencies include the training of lay men and lay women together with ordination candidates. Moreover, these reflections were submitted to the ATS Catholic membership at the 2000 ATS Biennial Meeting for critique and amendment. The writing committee is sensitive to the changing demographics in populations for seminaries and schools of theology, and it reflects this concern as much as possible in the body of the text. However, the reality that most schools have distinctive responsibilities for the formation of priesthood candidates is the basis for emphasis on the PPF at key points in the essay. The authors have endeavored to make clear that the “public character” of theological education is incumbent on every institution as it prepares its students for ministerial leadership, no matter what vocational expression, lay or ordained, is embraced by the candidate in the process of discernment.

### **Presuppositions and Themes in Roman Catholic Tradition**

An initial word about the Catholic experience in North America is in order. The Canadian experience of a powerful Catholic Church with a clear subculture was similar to but different from the U.S. experience. The U.S. Catholic immigrant community often found itself struggling to fit into U.S. culture, seeking acceptance and legitimization of its distinctive identity and gifts. Having come to a point in history where the U.S. Catholic community finds itself permeating American culture, i.e., at the center in positions of power as well as on the fringes in the face of new immigrants, it is perhaps better poised to speak a word in the public forum from within its particular tradition.

A starting point from within the Roman Catholic Tradition for a consideration of the involvement of seminaries and schools of theology in public discourse is an understanding of the mission of the church in the world. From that flows the mission of all those institutions within the church committed to the same universal mission from their particular vantage point, and in their

*The Public Character of Theological Education:  
A Perspective from Roman Catholic Schools of Theology and Seminaries*

particular locales and for their particular publics. Seminaries and schools of theology are inherently concerned with diverse publics because they educate and form people for ministry in the pluralistic societies of Canada and the United States. Certain key theological themes support this engagement with the broader public.

***The Church has a mission in the world.***

This is the vision of *Gaudium et Spes* (*Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*): engagement with the world. *Gaudium et Spes* captures the Catholic Church's self-understanding as a community in dialogue with the world. Desiring neither the control of Christendom nor privatization of religion, the Church seeks to engage in public discourse, aware that the Church as well as society will be enriched by such dialogue.

***The Catholic understanding of "sacramentality"***

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's phrase "earth's crammed with heaven" captures the theological presupposition that refuses a distinction between "secular" and "sacred." Combined with its theology of incarnation, Catholicism recognizes God's action at work in all of creation; it claims that grace permeates nature and that concern for God's action in the world requires attention to the "signs of the times" in order to discern God's work and the appropriate response. It also demands that living of the gospel be done not in abstract generalities (loving the brother or sister who is not seen) but in the particular. Sacramentality also implies that the whole world is potentially revelatory of God and can mediate the divine presence and will to human subjects.

***The anthropological understanding of the human person  
"in community"***

Shaped by its belief in a triune God and our theology of creation, the Catholic Tradition views the person as intrinsically relational and social; supported by contemporary social sciences, the Tradition continues to foster the mutual interdependence of all humanity as children of the same God.

***A positive view of the role of state and society***

In sharp contrast to a Hobbesian theory of the role of the state as a necessary evil to restrain untrammelled "self-interest," the Catholic Tradition favors a model of public order that values the role of the state to foster the "common good" (understood here as the sum total of basic needs and requirements to enable not just the survival of the individual but the "flourishing" of each person in communion with all others). As a corollary of this conviction, theology itself is "political." According to the Himes brothers, public theology is charged with the task of showing the "socially significant meanings of Christian symbols and tradition."<sup>3</sup>



*The Public Character of Theological Education:  
A Perspective from Roman Catholic Schools of Theology and Seminaries*

***All theology is public.***

If we accept theology as “faith seeking understanding” the whole world of believers, “earth’s crammed with heaven,” becomes a *locus theologicus* and an arena where insights gained from theological reflection ought to be shared in a way that is respectful of public discourse. “The public theologian searches for a way to make truth claims which can be tested by the public without the public having to assent to everything that the theologian believes.”<sup>4</sup>

**Understanding Section 3.2.3 in the ATS Standards from the Roman Catholic Experience: The *ad extra* / *ad intra* distinction**

The public character of theological education and its implementation in the Roman Catholic context influences the institution and its programs. Institutions of theological education in the Catholic tradition have various *raison d’être*, i.e., universities and colleges, seminaries, and schools of theology. Each institution is called to be present *ad extra*, to be present beyond its walls in relationship with diverse publics—to the wider Church, local diocese, other dioceses, and the universal Church; to society, the local community, and the world; to the academic community. Each institution develops programs consonant with its mission *ad intra* to educate and form people for ministry and service in the world, for their involvement with a diverse and manifold set of publics. This focus on what ought to occur *ad extra* and *ad intra* regarding the institution may serve as a helpful distinction to guide seminaries toward particular strategies to achieve the overarching goal of strengthening and shaping the public voice of theological education in the Catholic tradition.

Section 3.2.3 of the ATS standards of accreditation, “Involvement with Diverse Publics,” states that the way in which a particular institution balances and forms its engagement with its diverse publics will be guided by its particular purpose as an institution.<sup>5</sup> The faculty and administration will take responsibility for implementing this standard in the light of the institution’s mission, its resources and limitations. In shaping the public voice of the institution *ad extra*, it is important that the diverse publics be identified clearly and engaged in an intentional way. The understanding of the institution having a greater public voice within the church and society must be highlighted. The preparation of students for the role of public church ministry and of public service in society requires that the institution design its theology programs *ad intra* to educate and form students who will influence and engage more effectively the diverse public spheres that they will meet and serve. There must be a balance in the program that does not “overload” an existing curriculum, but emphasizes ways of teaching others to cultivate the talent and skill of entering into dialogue in the public sphere on social, political, civil, legal, and economic issues.

It is important that both the institution’s public voice and its programs to educate and form its students for public discourse be situated in the broader

*The Public Character of Theological Education:  
A Perspective from Roman Catholic Schools of Theology and Seminaries*

context of the Church. Attention should be given to the Church's mission and to theologically informed articulation of key themes in the tradition: the preferential option for the poor, solidarity, the common good, authoritative teaching (i.e., Magisterium), social justice, morality, spirituality, and theology; as well as a keen sensitivity to the role of the local ordinary who as Bishop is the chief shepherd and teacher of the local church. These considerations will necessarily shape the way in which the institution, various groups, or individuals engage in public theological discourse.

It may be helpful to propose concrete suggestions regarding the way institutions might promote "involvement with diverse publics" from the perspective of the *ad extra* and *ad intra* distinction. We begin with the *ad intra* distinction that springs from the internal, mission-driven ethos of the Catholic seminary and school of theology to prepare candidates who minister to the Church and to the wider public community.

***Ad intra***

- Design field education placements and internship periods that challenge students to engage in the wider cultural and public issues facing society and to make a connection between their immersion in the culture, the critique of it, and their spiritual life.
- Explore new pastoral methods of evangelization that will expose the student to the various dimensions of social communication in the age of media, noting the significant differences of messages delivered in verbal formats, or increasingly encoded in modern video and audio technologies.
- Include social analysis as part of the social justice curriculum to strengthen critical analysis of social systems and structures. Inculcate a capacity for dialogue around issues dealing with social ethics and moral theology. Greater attention to the body of social justice teaching in the church's tradition should be emphasized in the curriculum.
- Ensure, in academic courses, that there is a critical engagement with the tradition and public issues. The public issues must not be confined to exclusively political considerations, i.e., social, economic, legal, international, environmental issues. "Public theology" includes the capacity to interpret ecclesial, theological insights so that they are intelligible to others operating with different philosophical or conceptual frameworks.
- Integrate this "public" dimension of theology and ministry into the spiritual formation program, e.g., identity of the priest/minister; the social dimension of spirituality; accentuate the Catholic commitment to the communal liturgical/worship center for spirituality, a view that integrates prayer and

*The Public Character of Theological Education:  
A Perspective from Roman Catholic Schools of Theology and Seminaries*

ministry to overcome the dangers of excessive individualism in the spiritual life.

- Integrate this “public” aspect into areas of human formation, e.g., training students in the principles and skills of dialogue, collaboration, conflict management, group dynamics and facilitation, public speaking techniques, an awareness of the modes of communication, a knowledge of the culture and a sense of the audience.
- Use modern forms of media that reflect and convey the culture and that inculcate an awareness of gospel values, i.e., video documentaries and movies, art, music, drama, and the Internet.
- Require students (when possible) to take a course in another tradition in order to enter into another confessional experience.
- Develop learning outcomes for theology courses that engage public issues and that are measurable, e.g., assignments written for a non-believing audience. Homiletics and moral theology courses are particularly apt resources for such assignments.
- Select readings for course work that go beyond confessional literature and foster an understanding of diverse views and the need for common ground in fostering dialogue.
- Offer continuing education programs for priests/ministers that challenge them to confront the public dimension of their ministry, e.g., pastoral and human skills, homiletics, liturgy, pastoral care of the family and youth, ways of empowering the laity to witness to their primary vocation, etc.
- Organize faculty colloquia on public policy issues.

*Ad extra*

- Sponsor events or speakers that will engage diverse publics, i.e., local church, other churches or faith traditions, academic community, society, and that will contribute to the articulation of religion’s role and influence in the public sphere.
- Establish a continual and organized dialogue with professionals from the various media groups. An institution might be willing to offer the expertise of its faculty as a resource to the media for public commentary or help the media find other voices, e.g., the informed expertise among the laity.

*The Public Character of Theological Education:  
A Perspective from Roman Catholic Schools of Theology and Seminaries*

- Collaborate with other institutions, people, or groups who are addressing issues within the public sphere. Faculty, administration, and student involvement in social agencies of outreach, health care, worker associations, and human rights and environmental movements are examples of collaborative networks. This involvement could be direct or ancillary, e.g., serving in the capacity of a resource person on advisory committees and boards.
- Encourage public dialogue within the institution where the school mines its own particular tradition and raises issues from within the church's larger tradition that need to be lifted up in public debate, e.g., confronting domestic and systematic violence, or sponsoring groups like the "Common Ground Initiative," a dialogue designed to overcome fractious and polarizing theological debate within the American Catholic community by promoting civil and respectful discourse. Offering examples of respectful listening and dialogue comports with the Catholic esteem for community and the inestimable value of civic friendship for social harmony. Deborah Tannen observes in *The Argument Culture* that high-speed information processing contributes to a media culture mired in adversarial "sound bytes." The seminary is poised to offer public dialogue that is quite different.
- Engage in ecumenical outreach to partner with members of other faith communities in addressing issues of public policy, e.g., improve housing opportunities for low-income families.
- Develop ways and means of integrating the institution into the "new culture" created by modern communications. Maintain a web site as a resource to outside publics. Develop electronic access to the library collection, faculty resources, and theological scholarship.
- Develop and promote administrative policies, e.g., governance, employment, work place, etc., that model the justice we seek to establish in the world.

### **Tensions and Challenges: Topics for Further Exploration**

Any public discourse, whether within one's own community or with diverse external publics, will not occur without tension and challenge. Certain issues arise that merit further attention and must be addressed. While most Catholics agree that the Church has an important role to play in the "public square," they do not necessarily agree that this role should be played by seminaries and schools of theology. If these institutions are to meet the challenge of section 3.2.3 in the ATS standards, three interrelated issues deserve attention: priestly identity, the nature of priestly formation, and the institutional role of the seminary as a form of ecclesial public presence.

*The Public Character of Theological Education:  
A Perspective from Roman Catholic Schools of Theology and Seminaries*

***Identity of Priestly and Lay Leadership***

Like a human body, the community of believers is differentiated. Not all are pastors, apostles, or prophets. Each believer must find and fulfill his or her unique calling if the body is to be healthy and productive. American Catholics, including bishops, have varied opinions about the contemporary role of priests and pastoral ministers. Priestly identity is a significant and controverted issue among Catholics. Yet, normative teachings dealing with the mission of the Church and the task of fulfilling that mission support an understanding of priestly identity and the role of the Church's ministers consistent with the expectation of section 3.2.3.

Vatican II acknowledges that the church's mission is not simply entrusted to the hierarchy but is the responsibility of all her members, lay and ordained. Though ministerial priesthood and the priesthood of the baptized faithful differ in kind, they are "ordered to one another." Recovering and deepening the category of "relationship" that flows from this mutuality is necessary for the collaboration necessary for the fulfillment of this responsibility and so called for in the *Program of Priestly Formation* (PPF, 22).

The last council taught that the church was to be deeply immersed in the joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties of contemporary men and women in order that the mission of Christ might be continued. As Paul VI stated, "the very nature of the Church's mission involves the renewal of the whole temporal order" (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 5). Therefore, the Church has an authentic secular dimension, inherent to her inner nature and mission, which is deeply rooted in the mystery of the Word Incarnate, and which is realized in different forms through her members. (*Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 64 [1972] 208).

John Paul II elaborates. He teaches that "all the members of the Church are sharers in this secular dimension but *in different ways*. . . the *lay* state of life has its distinctive feature in its secular character. It fulfills an ecclesial service in bearing witness and, in its own way recalling for priests, women and men religious, the significance of the earthly and temporal realities in the salvific plan of God" (*Christifideles Laici*, 55). The pope goes on to say that "the lay faithful must bear witness to those human and gospel values that are intimately connected with political activity itself, such as liberty and justice, solidarity, faithful and unselfish dedication for the good of all, a simple life-style, and a preferential love for the poor and the least. This demands that the lay faithful always be more animated by a real participation in the life of the Church and enlightened by her social doctrine. In this they can be supported and helped by the nearness of the Christian community and their Pastors" (*Christifideles Laici*, 42).<sup>6</sup>

If this is the vocation of the baptized, how is the ministerial priesthood "ordered" to this calling?

John Paul sheds light on the question when he writes, the *ministerial* priesthood represents, in different times and places, the permanent guarantee

*The Public Character of Theological Education:  
A Perspective from Roman Catholic Schools of Theology and Seminaries*

of the sacramental presence of Christ, the Redeemer. That presence demands that “the priest must be a witness of the charity of Christ himself who ‘went about doing good’ (Acts 10:38). He must also be a visible sign of the solicitude of the Church who is mother and teacher. And given that humanity today is affected by so many hardships, especially those who are sunk in inhuman poverty, blind violence and unjust power, it is necessary that the man of God who is to be equipped for every good work (cf. 2 Tim. 3:17) should defend the rights and dignity of all” (*Pastores dabo vobis*, 58).

Modeling a kind of citizenship that attempts to invest public life with the light and leaven of the gospel is not inconsistent with the church’s expectation of priests and other ecclesial ministers.

***Forming for Pastoral Leadership***

Yet, it is not always clear that candidates for the Church’s ministry themselves realize what will be required of them. Victor Klimoski, a former seminary dean, notes that in nearly twenty years of admissions work, he rarely heard a candidate say that he wanted to become a priest to be a leader, form community, evangelize the wider culture, or enable the ministries of others.<sup>7</sup> Today’s candidates for ministry are products of a culture in which faith is privatized and conversation about the common good next to impossible. This poses a challenge to each seminary and school of theology: implementing the *Program of Priestly Formation* (PPF) in such a way that students develop the range of capacities needed for a kind of leadership that includes attention to issues affecting the common good.

This demand is not a new challenge. In a world far less complex than our own, Abp. John Ireland (1838-1918) claimed that “what is needed [for the priesthood] is men who know the period, the condition of people’s minds—the prevailing errors and the way to combat them and then good speakers—men . . . of refinement of thoughts and feelings—gentlemen that no man of education need be ashamed to acknowledge as pastor.” According to Ireland’s contemporary, Rochester’s Bp. Bernard McQuaid (1823-1909), “the church needs that her clergy should be equipped with depth and broadness of knowledge not limited to the ordinary text books of theological lore, but reaching out into the various roads traveled by the secularist and the scientific scholar. . . . We can not shut our eyes to what is going on in the world. And in preparing our young men for the ministry, it is a duty to prepare them for the world as it is today.”<sup>8</sup> In our own time, *Lumen Gentium* (43) says that priests “should fit themselves to do their part in establishing dialogue with the world and with [those] of all shades of opinion,” and *Gaudium et Spes* (4) teaches that the priest will be an effective minister when he “recognizes and understands the world in which we live, its longings and its often dramatic characteristics.” The conciliar document on the ministerial priesthood, *Presbyterorum Ordinis* (3), argues that the ordained cannot be of service if they remain strangers to the life and conditions of the people they serve. Clearly, then, an important way in which priests

*The Public Character of Theological Education:  
A Perspective from Roman Catholic Schools of Theology and Seminaries*

become familiar with the life and conditions of those they serve is through education. Priests and others who exercise pastoral care must be educated broadly and well.

*Pastores Dabo Vobis* (PDV), John Paul's apostolic exhortation on priestly formation, speaks to the importance of serious study in the ministerial formation. The document states that "the commitment to study, which takes up no small part of the time of those preparing for the priesthood, is not in fact an external and secondary dimension of their human, Christian, spiritual and vocational growth. In reality, through study, especially the study of theology, the future priest assents to the word of God, grows in his spiritual life and prepares himself to fulfill his pastoral ministry" (PDV, 51). The pope also states that "the pastoral nature of theology does not mean that it should be less doctrinal or that it should be completely stripped of its scientific nature" (PDV, 55). The seminary's academic program should adhere to appropriate standards. The *Program of Priestly Formation* (PPF) says that seminarians "should have degrees certified by appropriate accrediting agencies, and students should not be excused from pursuing such degrees except for very serious reasons" (PPF, 393). Those who presume that the theologate's program is sufficient for life-long ministry are reminded that "the intellectual dimension of formation likewise needs to be continually fostered through the priest's entire life, especially by a commitment to study and a serious and disciplined familiarity with modern culture" (PDV, 72). However, maintaining the quality advocated by the normative texts is sometimes difficult. When the pool of candidates is small, the temptation to lower standards is strong, and there is a similar temptation to substitute piety for knowledge.

In addition to echoing a long-standing call for the kind of quality education that commands respect, the *Program of Priestly Formation* recommends that in such an education "the academic formation of seminarians should also lead them to study in detail the social teaching of the Church in order to understand from an informed theological perspective the Church's role in the struggle for justice, peace and the integrity of human life. Such study should mold seminarians into articulate spokesmen for and interpreters of Catholic social teaching in today's circumstances" (PPF, 345). It also stresses the importance of faculty development (PPF, 494) in social justice as a prerequisite for inculcating this value in their students.

### ***The Institution's Public Presence***

Normative church documents make it clear that seminaries and schools of theology should not position themselves in a manner that would compromise the work of priestly formation. Tensions arise when it appears that other activities are distracting from this purpose. Yet, if certain limitations are respected, these institutions can play the important public role advocated by section 3.2.3.

*The Public Character of Theological Education:  
A Perspective from Roman Catholic Schools of Theology and Seminaries*

There should be no expectation that our seminaries and schools of theology function as social science think-tanks. These institutions are not oriented to provide answers to social problems. Rather it is in being faithful to their ecclesial mission that schools responsible for ordained and lay ministerial formation function within the context of American higher education as centers of graduate theological scholarship (PPF, 251). As a center of theological scholarship, a seminary or school of theology can provide a needed public service by addressing public issues in light of a distinctive faith perspective. As an “educational community in progress” (PDV, 60), a seminary or school of theology remains faithful to its mission and capable of making a contribution to enriching public life by establishing and cultivating those relationships that help the school as a community of teaching and learning “recognize and understand” the world in which it lives.

The first relationship to be nurtured is the relationship with the local bishop. Seminaries and schools of theology, depending upon their status as freestanding, diocesan sponsored, or university-related, experience distinctive relationships with bishops in their role as official teachers of Church doctrine and practice. Intentional conversations between bishops and faculty create a foundation on which fruitful partnerships can be built that provide “public” witness.

An example is the collaboration seminaries and schools of theology can have with various diocesan or national church agencies that address important social, political, and cultural issues. Because they have given particular consideration to the pastoral character of their disciplines, seminary and school of theology faculty have a unique contribution to make to the work of these agencies. Such collaboration brings benefit to the church and also provides an opportunity for students to see the importance and value of the various theological disciplines as resources to address issues of public policy and social concern.

Another effective partnership is the relationship seminaries and schools of theology have with the increasing number of lay persons aspiring to theological education for ministry. Meeting the needs of these students and providing them with support and direction is a service that benefits not only the church, but also the public square. As more and more citizens become theologically literate, the tone of public discourse will be affected.

As pastoral life becomes more complex and the face of ministry changes, it will be increasingly beneficial for seminaries and schools of theology to be in relationship with each other. It will be important to make sure that different models are not working at cross-purposes. It is equally important that institutions are preparing priests and lay ministers who are genuinely able to work together in a local church. These institutions can also benefit from faculty-sharing in order to maintain the critical mass of priests on faculty. It is important that the various schools work together not only for the sake of



*The Public Character of Theological Education:  
A Perspective from Roman Catholic Schools of Theology and Seminaries*

priest/lay partnership in ministry, but also for the sake of collaboration on the part of diocesan and religious community priests working in the same presbyterate of a local diocese.

Dialogue between seminaries/schools of theology and theological departments of local universities also relates the school for ministry to the larger public. The respective missions of these institutions will shape the focus of theological research within the various faculties. These distinctive research commitments may yield further opportunities to advance the public voice of Catholic theological education. For example, a seminary/school of theology faculty may contribute insights into the pastoral implications of a proposed local housing ordinance, while university colleagues might engage other academic constituencies to provide comprehensive social and theologically informed political analysis of the proposed ordinance. Collaboration on such projects extends the resources of each institution's faculties and provides opportunity for creativity in addressing the public character of theological education.

Developing relationships with specialists in science and technology, business and industry, as well as law and medicine, faculty members make their institutions resources for the work of these professionals. The specifically pastoral character of seminary and school of theology academic programs makes these institutions well-suited for collaboration with groups of professional lay persons who seek pastoral help in integrating faith, family, and work.

Governance structures are also important relationships connecting schools with the public. Most seminaries and schools of theology are governed or directed by a Board of Trustees. Such governance is an application of the principle stated by the American bishops in their 1993 pastoral letter, *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response*.<sup>9</sup> Lay Catholics ought to have an active role in the oversight of their pastors' stewardship. Those who invest "time, treasure, and talent" in the seminary/school of theology are also those who both interpret the school and its mission to the public, and interpret the expectations of the public to the seminary. If the seminary/school of theology is to be more intentional about its public voice, education, and board development is crucial to the success of such an initiative. Enhanced awareness among the trustees can extend the institution's reach into other venues and can provide the institution's leadership with access to additional leadership resources in higher education and corporate structures. Clearly there is a need to discern what the public voice of the institution is and how the graduate/"product" of that institution is to serve in the church with a public voice.

Board members are important resources for helping seminaries and schools of theology determine the effectiveness of their programs. Because many board members are men and women who already have wide circulation in the communities served by the institution, they are able to assess the impact

*The Public Character of Theological Education:  
A Perspective from Roman Catholic Schools of Theology and Seminaries*

graduates have on the people to whom they minister. What do board members hear about the institution and its graduates from business colleagues and social acquaintances? To what degree does the ministry of the graduates penetrate in the community outside the church? Trustees are in a position to provoke the institution's administration to develop new or modify existing programs to prepare those entering ministry to address needs requiring their attention.

Finally, a seminary or school of theology plays a significant role in public life when, as an institution, it is intentional about its own good citizenship. No matter where it is located the institution is a neighbor. Administrators make a significant statement about the value of the common good when they stay abreast of local issues and when they cause the institution to be represented at meetings and events affecting the welfare of the community. The institution also plays an important public role by developing and adhering to responsible investment guidelines.

### **Concluding Reflections**

The purpose of this essay has been to offer some reflections for the benefit of seminaries and schools of theology as they respond to the challenge of section 3.2.3 in the redeveloped standards of accreditation. It certainly is not an exhaustive theological or programmatic treatise. It has, however, identified some representative theological trajectories in the Catholic appraisal of "Christ and Culture," practical applications that can be readily evaluated in a process of "outcomes assessment," as well as tensions and challenges in responding to the "public character" of theology. Two significant insights have been gleaned with which we close this piece. First of all, responding to the challenge of the "public character" of theology is not a problem to be identified and solved, but rather woven into the fabric of meaning and value that constitute the "hermeneutic" of the ATS standards. Along with globalization, planning and evaluation, the value of inclusion across racial/ethnic and gender lines, and the importance of freedom of inquiry for teaching and learning that are thematically integrated into the new standards, theology's "public" character and the diverse "publics" it addresses are thematic issues that permeate the scholarly task of learning, teaching, and research. Secondly, seminaries and schools of theology are genuine stakeholders and participants in the "public square" who have the responsibility and opportunity to articulate their scope of involvement in matters of public policy and values. It is clear to the authors that highlighting the "public character" of Catholic theology is internally driven by the very nature of theology itself, and is essential to the mission of ministerial formation. In other words, emphasizing the "public character" of theology is a matter of being faithful to the demands of the gospel. The challenge of the Auburn Center report for the enhanced "visibility" of seminaries and schools of theology in the public forum should not invite a response of panic in the face

*The Public Character of Theological Education:  
A Perspective from Roman Catholic Schools of Theology and Seminaries*

of intellectual and social marginalization by the forces of “modernity” and “postmodernity.” Rather, asserting theology’s “public character” is a matter of reclaiming its authentic mandate to register the voice of “ultimate concern” in critical engagement with other speakers in the public square.

*Members of the Catholic study group include: Msgr. Jeremiah McCarthy, chair, St. John’s Seminary, Camarillo, California; Fr. Gerald Coleman, S.S., St. Patrick’s Seminary, Menlo Park, California; Fr. William McGrattan, St. Peter’s Seminary, London, Ontario; Fr. Daniel McLellan, O.F.M., Washington Theological Union, Washington, DC; Fr. J. William Morell, O.M.I., Oblate School of Theology, San Antonio, Texas; Fr. Kevin O’Neil, C.Ss.R., Washington Theological Union, Washington, DC; Fr. Gary Riebe-Estrella, S.V.D., Catholic Theological Union, Chicago, Illinois; and consultants Thomas Chabolla, Secretariat for Pastoral and Community Services, Archdiocese of Los Angeles; Edward Dolesji, Executive Director of the California Catholic Conference; David Dorman, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California; Cardinal Roger M. Mahony, Archbishop of Los Angeles; and Fr. Thomas Rosica, C.S.B., formerly at the University of St. Michael’s College, Toronto, Ontario, and currently National Director of World Youth Days.*

ENDNOTES

1. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1951).
2. Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1984).
3. Michael J. Himes and Kenneth R. Himes, *Fullness of Faith: The Public Significance of Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993).
4. *Ibid.*, 18.
5. Section 3.2.3 of the ATS standards, “Involvement with Diverse Publics,” reads as follows:
  - 3.2.3.1 Theological scholarship requires engagement with a diverse and manifold set of publics. Although the particular purpose of a school will influence the balance and forms of this engagement, schools shall assume responsibility for relating to the church, the academic community, and the broader public.
  - 3.2.3.2 Theological scholarship informs and enriches the reflective life of the church. The school should demonstrate awareness of the diverse manifestations of religious community encompassed by the term *church*: congregations, denominations, parachurch organizations, broad confessional traditions, and the church catholic. Library collections, courses, and degree programs should represent the historical breadth, cultural difference, confessional diversity, and global scope of Christian life and thought.
  - 3.2.3.3 The theological faculty contributes to the advancement of learning within theological education and, more broadly, in the academic community, by contributions to the scholarly study of religion and its role in higher education.

*The Public Character of Theological Education:  
A Perspective from Roman Catholic Schools of Theology and Seminaries*

3.2.3.4 Theological scholarship contributes to the articulation of religion's role and influence in the public sphere. The faculty and administration should take responsibility for the appropriate exercise of this public interpretive role to enrich the life of a culturally and religiously diverse society.

6. For an excellent discussion of the prospects for lay ecclesial ministry, the authors refer the reader to *Lay Ecclesial Ministry: State of the Question*, A Report of the Subcommittee on Lay Ministry, prepared by the Committee on the Laity of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, published by United States Catholic Conference, 1999.
7. Katarina Schuth, *Seminaries, Theologates and the Future of Church Ministry* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 36.
8. Joseph M. White, *The Diocesan Seminary in the United States: A History from the 1780s to the Present* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 214.
9. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response* (Washington: Office for Publishing and Promotion Services, 1993).

# The Public Character of Mainline Theological Education

*Principal writers for the Mainline Protestant Study Group:  
Elizabeth C. Nordbeck, Andover Newton Theological School  
Douglas F. Ottati, Union Theological Seminary and  
Presbyterian School of Christian Education*

*ABSTRACT: Although they often differ widely, mainline Protestant seminaries share a common commitment to one (and occasionally more) particular denominational traditions; thus any exploration of these schools' "public character" must begin with a consideration of this partnership. To explore both the need and the warrant for an enhanced public voice, the mainline seminary group invited a number of denominational officials, religious professionals, and seminary staff members to consider the question, "What role do—and should—our schools have in interpreting public events and in training persons to provide public leadership?"*

## Mainline Seminaries: A Complex Context for Study

Although some commentators today insist that words like *oldline* or even *sideline* are more accurate, the term *mainline*<sup>1</sup> historically has described several "establishment," culture-defining denominations that dominated religious thought in America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The designation includes Presbyterians, Lutherans, Congregationalists, Methodists, northern Baptists, Episcopalians, and others who generally embraced modernist thought. Although these groups have always been distinguished by regional, theological, and cultural differences, they also have shared certain characteristic emphases that have helped shape their collective social witness: belief in the reality of God's kingdom in our midst, optimism about human possibility and progress, openness to culture and its innovations, and conviction that the Christian faith is involved with the totality of life.

Many mainline Protestant denominations have strong histories of social commitment and activism during the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries. From the 1830s on, a vast network of mainline enterprises (often referred to as the "benevolent empire" or—somewhat ironically now—as the "evangelical united front") arose for the purpose of advancing not just the church, but Christian civilization. Often interdenominational in nature, these purposive societies dealt with a host of perceived public needs and problems, from temperance and women's rights to slavery and urban sanitation. In the twentieth century, North American mainline Protestants retained significant

public voice and moral authority, from widespread anti-war activity during World War I through the Civil Rights era of the early 1960s. But while the latter conflict unified members of many mainline churches, the Vietnam War of the following decade had the opposite effect. In the early 1970s, many mainline churchgoers were polarized, demoralized, and wearied over issues of war and peace, patriotism and protest. Later (and currently ongoing) debates—such as abortion, gay and lesbian rights, welfare reform, and environmental activism—continued to divide and sometimes discourage more than a few of these communities. At the same time, the much-discussed decline in numbers in virtually all mainline denominations typically shifted attention away from public proclamation and activity, and inward to issues of identity and renewal.

Like the denominations they represent, mainline seminaries have always been distinguished by regional, theological, and cultural differences. Arguably, these distinctions are more sharply realized today. For some seminaries, the line between “evangelical” and “mainline” has become increasingly blurred; for others, patterns of race and ethnicity, rather than theological stance, are definitive in articulating mission; for still others, a witness as “alternative communities” is central to identity. Nevertheless, mainline seminaries also share significant commonalities. Most of these schools share a broadly ecumenical heritage, one result of which is student (and sometimes faculty) populations that range widely across denominational and theological perspectives. Many of them express, in mission statements, curricular emphases, and preferred pedagogies, a strong commitment to the vocation of pastoral ministry; frequently this manifests itself in the intentional integration of theory and practice, including the role of ministers as participants in the wider community. At the same time, these schools typically affirm the ministries of all the baptized, encouraging laity to discern their own arenas for service and commitment.

One decisive commonality among these seminaries is their relationship, either formal or covenantal, to particular denominational traditions. As the name “mainline” suggests, many of these schools are relatively old, having been founded in the era of nineteenth-century Protestant hegemony to ensure denominational particularity and orthodoxy in a competitive North American Christian marketplace. Moreover, the well-documented loss of numbers and power among mainline denominations since the late 1950s has influenced their affiliated seminaries—and the latter’s public presence—in several ways:

- Seminaries have necessarily shared in the diminished influence and decreased majority voice of their founding denominations. The news media still consult the Roman Catholic archbishop about world affairs, but do not routinely call on the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) or the President of the United Church of Christ. Unlike some university-related or Roman Catholic schools, mainline seminaries have no reflected presence drawn from public awareness of football teams or “star” faculty in areas like science and government.

- As numbers of members and ministers have dwindled overall, so have operating funds for some theological schools. This is a function both of fewer students (and therefore fewer tuition dollars) and of limited money for support of theological education within denominations themselves. Seminary personnel today often must look outside their own historic constituencies for new students at the same time they are under pressure from sponsoring denominations to shore up their relationships and identity with these same constituencies.
- As denominations themselves have been challenged by internal pluralism and erosion of their theological particularities, seminaries have sometimes found it more difficult to articulate a focused and coherent theological stance of their own. This effect has both encouraged and been encouraged by the new presence on campus of students from many different theological traditions—in part, a legacy of the historic mainline openness to theological diversity. A sufficiently large critical mass of students from other traditions may present a strong challenge to the traditional beliefs and practices of the sponsoring denomination, creating potential conflicts between finances and faithfulness.
- More than a few mainline seminaries have old and ailing physical plants, accompanied by predictable problems of deferred maintenance. This has implications for program: if the roof is leaking, funds will probably not be diverted to embrace new technologies and delivery systems. In part for this reason, some mainline schools have been comparatively slow to embrace change in new arenas of communication that could have an effect on their public presence and voice.

If this litany of mainline woes suggests the time is not right for seminaries to encourage renewal of their public voice and presence, other factors suggest precisely the opposite. For example, careful investments and an established donor base have left some mainline seminaries considerably stronger and wealthier than they were two decades ago. Other schools have capitalized on changing demographics, encouraging a multicultural student population and promoting renewal by focusing mission on the new urban population. Moreover, many argue that displacing the cultural hegemony mainline Protestantism has enjoyed is not necessarily a bad thing. Indeed, in some quarters this “diminished status” has begun to function as a kind of prudential wake-up call, forcing consideration of new strategies and actions. For example, dwindling funds and/or awareness of staff limitations have encouraged academic and administrative collaboration among some seminaries, both within denominations and regionally across denominational lines. Faced with a changing student population—the average age of students at many mainline seminaries today is upwards of thirty—schools have experimented creatively with their curricula, developing academic delivery systems that meet the unique needs of second-career students. And, conscious of dwindling numbers, seminary faculty and denominational staff members have been encouraged to understand their respective roles as a complementary partnership, preparing a new

kind of leadership for churches that cannot assume the cultural and community dominance of years past.

### **Reinventing a Public Voice: The Context for a Two-Phase Project**

The mainline group quickly concluded that focused conversation between seminaries, religious professionals, and denominational officials will be essential if mainline leadership is to find faithful ways of recapturing its historic public role and voice. Conscious of the absence of consensus among these denominations on many matters, including the appropriate public role of contemporary Christians—and conscious, also, of the lack of any *magisterium* within Protestantism generally—we chose to take a different starting point from the other three study groups of the Public Character of Theological Education project. Rather than beginning with a focus on mainline Protestant identity and its broad theological rationale for public voice and witness, we decided to look first at the mainline context for public witness and the practitioners within it. We identified as partners in the mainline public voice and witness a variety of religious leaders: denominational staff, seminary faculty and administrators, pastors of congregations, community religious leaders. We then invited a number of such persons—specifically identifying those whose ministries are directly involved in public witness—to explore both their understanding of the *warrant* for engaging in public ministries, and their strategies for doing so effectively.

Phase One of our project was the planning of a small, two-day conference in Washington, DC, in February 2000 to initiate this conversation, together with a luncheon discussion four months later at the ATS Biennial Meeting in Toronto. The Washington conference included all members of the mainline group itself, staff, and ten invited participants from five mainline denominations (American Baptist, United Church of Christ, Presbyterian, Episcopal, and United Methodist). In choosing participants, we made no attempt to be rigorously inclusive; because of the small size of the conference, we intended to consult only with a representative sample. Moreover, because we wanted to focus on understanding the context, articulating the warrant for public ministries, and identifying possible strategies for change, we invited only persons who might be expected to support a more active public presence within their denominations, churches, and seminaries.

The overarching focus of the Washington conference was the question, “What role do—and should—mainline theological seminaries have in interpreting public events and in training persons to provide public leadership?” (For our purposes, we defined “public leadership” as leadership that is actively concerned with matters outside the boundaries of a particular ministry setting—for example, the religious leader who works with teenagers in the community, lobbies for environmental reform, or is a radio or newspaper commentator on matters of public interest.) More particularly, our goal was to



begin exploring the unique challenges facing mainline seminaries, *for the purpose of strategizing for effective change.*

Each participant was asked to present a brief response to four questions:

1. How do you understand yourself as a theological interpreter of public events and issues, *and* as a person who forms others in this practice?
2. What influenced your own formation as a public leader and interpreter, both by intention and by accident?
3. What was the influence of theological education in this formation?
4. What helps you personally “hang in there” as a public leader and interpreter? (For example, do you have support groups, spiritual or devotional practices, colleague networks. . . ?)

The participants were grouped into three panels: persons affiliated with theological schools, local pastors or community religious leaders, and denominational officials.<sup>2</sup> The first day consisted of presentations from the panelists and group discussion. On the second day, a theological reflector (a former seminary president) summarized common themes heard in the presentations, and the entire group engaged in general conversation.

### **A Theological Warrant for Public Voice**

In discussing the theological foundations for an active public witness and voice, our practitioners mentioned a number of different theological images and themes. Even so, their theological remarks tended to cluster around the following convictions:

- This is God’s good world.
- The world is mired in corruption.
- It is the vocation or calling of Christians and their communities to participate faithfully in God’s world.
- To discharge this vocation and calling requires us to be attentive to standards of justice.
- There is reason to hope.

The conviction that this is God’s good world came to expression in a variety of ways. An Episcopal priest emphasized the sacramental sense that this is a world of divine presence, in which we meet God at every turn. Others tended to regard the world as God’s commonwealth or dominion in which we encounter divine purposes. Some simply pointed to the importance of participating in the public square as a way of responding to God. But all shared the sense that this is a world of divine presence and purpose, and that the specific corners of culture and society in which we labor and live, from the corridors of federal government to the gang-ridden streets of Boston, amount to providentially imposed contexts for faithful engagement.

The sense that the world is also corrupted came through in a variety of ways. A number of the practitioners find themselves in contexts where they must faithfully criticize and oppose economic structures and interests, as well

## *The Public Character of Mainline Theological Education*

as government agencies that favor the projects of the powerful and neglect the needs of the poor. Others noted that the preparation of ministers for public leadership and the interpretation of public life require some consideration of, as well as some exposure to, the prophetic role of criticizing and denouncing the idols of contemporary American society.

How these two points (that the world is God's good creation and that it is subject to sin and corruption) often came together was reflected in the participants' complex view of civil government. On the one hand, practitioners shared the sense that government is good and a needed precondition for human flourishing. Government, then, is something worth participating in. (Indeed, one of our practitioners is a counselor to members of the United States Congress.) On the other hand, participants were clear that civil government, necessary as it is, remains subject to dangerous idolatries and corruptions.

This signals two additional points. Like their nineteenth-century denominational counterparts, all our practitioners shared in the conviction that Christians and their communities are called to participate faithfully in God's world. All were convinced that faithful Christians belong *in* the world, rather than apart from it. One participant saw this simply as a matter of discipleship and following Jesus. Indeed, all might have agreed with a statement made by the president of a mainline seminary at the turn of the twentieth century: "The Protestant ideal is ministry rather than monasticism." Our mainline interpreters of and participants in public life all agreed that the calling or vocation of Christians and their communities is actively to engage the worlds of nature, society, family, politics, sexuality, economics, education, and the arts and sciences.

But of course, since this good world also suffers from persistent and radical corruption, this participatory calling and vocation cannot be without discrimination and form. It cannot be uncritical. It needs to be guided by discriminating criteria. Otherwise it will lose its faithfulness and integrity. And a criterion for faithful participation in God's good but corrupted world to which our practitioners returned again and again is *justice*: justice in advocating the civil rights of persons and minorities, justice for women, justice in enfranchising the poor.

Finally, we would be remiss if we neglected a note of grace. Since this is God's good world, and since God is faithful and refuses to abandon even wayward creatures to destruction, our practitioners also expressed the conviction that faithful witness and ministries can sometimes succeed against long odds. This point was illustrated in accounts of urban programs in battered neighborhoods, of pastoral conversations with persons in power, and even in the story of a quite ordinary church camp. Small, seemingly insignificant actions and programs, both within and outside of the church, sometimes bear unexpected fruit. And so, no matter how corrupt, discouraging, and even desperate things may appear, practitioners of public ministry in the mainline continue to be nourished by hope.

## **Some Important Themes**

How do these practitioners understand their own public ministries? What experiences and/or convictions undergird their work? What wisdom have they gleaned, from experience and reflection, about the relationship of theological education and public ministry? We asked each participant to reflect personally on his or her vocation, and to share concerns and hopes about the formation of persons for public ministry today. Several themes emerged clearly from this conversation.

### ***The importance of sound theological understanding***

Participants used several different metaphors and images to describe and ground their commitment to public ministry: the reign or kingdom of God, baptism, the body of Christ. All, however, insisted on the critical importance of solid theological grounding for both self-understanding and understanding of public ministry. Such grounding may be complex. Clearly it involves learning the traditions of our deposited faith. But also, because “theology typically enters into people’s lives at points when they are making decisions about the future,” theological grounding may mean *un-learning* aspects of these traditions. A seminary president argued that here the issue of authority is crucial: “Who says what ideas are authoritative?” Sometimes we must challenge received theological ideas, asking, “Do they hinder life, or foster wholeness?”

Theological grounding also helps individuals “reflect on their personal stories and link them with the community story.” It discourages the culture of narcissism—a danger in today’s individualistic religious climate—and helps people form their ministries “not in a privatized, but in a communal way.” This “communal way” means that our articulation of theologies in support of a public voice will necessarily derive from the theologies of our individual denominations; although “we may not all start at the same place,” we can nevertheless agree with the legitimacy of one another’s efforts. Perhaps above all, sound theological grounding teaches people that sometimes their theological ground will—indeed, must—shift. A pastor, for example, noted that seminary training had provided him with the “theological apparatus” he needed to do public ministry, and had urged him “to grow from it rather than be wedded to it.” His theology has changed since seminary, he reported, but theological education itself taught him that “*that is okay.*”

### ***The importance of personal “defining moments” and practices***

Without exception, participants in the Washington conference agreed that certain defining, transforming moments and/or practices in their own lives had given them a new understanding of themselves and their capabilities, their society, and their public roles and voices. One participant, a seminary presi-

dent, told of the time when, as a boy, he hurt his arm trying to start a large tractor with a manual crank. Although he was ready to quit, the older men encouraged him to get back up and try again: "If you don't do it now, you never will." Now, confronted with the choice to act or to "cool it," he hears the men saying, "Crank the tractor, boy!" Another participant, also a seminary president, described her experience with a woman who justified her ongoing relationship with an abusive husband theologically: "Being a good Christian means being willing to sacrifice at any cost." How many similar ideas, she wonders, subtly influence public policy? Part of our task, she concludes, must be to reflect critically on the public implication of theological ideas: "do they hinder life, or foster wholeness?" A third participant, an African American pastor and community leader in Boston, was planning to take a rural church in the South after seminary. But when two local youth—only a year or two younger than he, but with a vast social gulf between them—were killed in a fight over a leather jacket, he discovered a new call to work "outside the walls" with "the least, the lost, and the left out."

In some instances, defining experiences took place in the context of seminary training. Typically these were not isolated conversional "moments," but practices, ideas, relationships, models, or habits of the mind that were deeply formative. One faculty participant spoke of the importance of cooperative learning models in her education—an experience that has now been "encoded into the way [she sees] ministry." Another noted that her seminary training "deconstructed, then reconstructed" her beliefs, never allowing her to be one-sided in perspective. Instead, it taught her that "there are many pathways to faithful, creative responses." A denominational official noted that his seminary training offered "experience of a community that embodied God's involvement in daily life." Courses made a "clear connection between God's activity and human events" and equipped him with tools to interpret these events. However, a former denominational staff person, now head of an international conference center, was more cautious about the role of seminary training in the public aspect of his formation. Although seminary both supported and pushed him to articulate his faith in understandable ways, he feels that for the most part the academic community is "confined or set apart in some way." Only in the context of truly "being there"—in the midst of the poor or the oppressed, struggling for liberation—can one really learn. The task of "growing communities of faithful witness," he believes, is not always part of the curriculum.

### *The importance of cultural "defining moments"*

All agreed that during the early 1960s, mainline church members seemed to share a single-minded and clear justice agenda that transcended personal, cultural, or institutional interests. The civil rights movement was a defining moment, not only personally for several of our participants, but also for

American culture as a whole. (A striking moment in the conference occurred when an African American participant noted that, unlike several of the white participants who had been active civil rights workers, he was six years old when Martin Luther King, Jr. died, and learned about the struggle for civil rights from books and the recollections of his parents.) Today the mainline churches share a general concern for justice, but a pluralism of concerns about what—if any—specific justice issues are worthy of their efforts. Indeed, conflicting agendas characterize mainline churchgoers. A panelist recalled her participation in a public hearing as a supporter for the civil rights of gay, lesbian, and bisexual persons. Approximately seventy percent of those present were in favor of *limiting* the rights for these persons—and many of these, like her, announced that they were “speaking as a Christian.” Together our participants asked: In the absence of an overriding metaphor for public witness, such as civil rights or “the great society,” what carries the social meaning of the gospel today? If, as one practitioner noted, social changes often have the best chance of happening when self-interest and idealism go together, what are the implications for seminary teaching and learning?

### ***Leadership***

The importance of priestly and prophetic leadership, in both church and community, should not be underestimated. Leaders have certain characteristics in common. First, they are willing to *name* social concerns that others refuse to name. One participant described the function of the prophetic leader as being “a watcher on the wall,” prepared to “call out” to the people. Second, leaders make connections that others don’t see. They “build bridges between the everydayness of life and the church’s teachings”—or, as one participant suggested, they are in effect translators, “putting it where everyone can get it.” Third, strong leaders must be prepared to hold things in a creative tension; for example, they must both *conserve* and *challenge* the tradition, as necessary. And they should not understand the roles of prophet and priest as separate; what is needed is “pastors who act like prophets, and prophets who nurture and act like priests.” An important question that emerged is whether or not the recent model of “leader as facilitator and empowerer of others” has undercut the prophetic role, perhaps especially as it relates to taking controversial stands on public issues.

### ***The role of mentors***

Many participants spoke about the importance of mentors in their own development—teachers, friends, family members, or counselors who “opened up new worlds” to them and walked with them into those worlds. Significantly, few could remember much about the *intellectual content* of what they learned from mentors; rather, the power of modeling, personality, and personal witness was critically important. Several panelists spoke of special

teachers who “helped cast out students’ parochialisms” or who took a personal interest in their development. One man described the powerful role his own mother played in shaping his identity and sensibilities: despite his protests, she made him wear a dashiki, “picked out” his hair into an Afro, and told him, “Be proud because you’re black. And just keep reading books.” Mentors may also be historical figures, not individuals known personally. John Winthrop, first governor of Massachusetts colony, profoundly affected one practitioner’s social views with his radical conviction that the new Puritan colony should be “knit together as one man.” Participants wondered: What might these experiences suggest about effective teaching styles, subjects, or about desirable interactions among seminary faculty, students, and religious leaders?

### ***Transformation***

“Transformation” is in some measure a contemporary buzzword, signaling the need for ongoing conversion, change, and growth as persons mature in their Christian faith and practice. Personal transformation can be intentionally promoted in a variety of ways—for example, as individuals are affirmed, challenged, and stretched intellectually, or as they experience and reflect theologically on unfamiliar situations. Participants in the conference generally agreed that in this gradual process of maturation, sharing information and knowledge is essential, but *encounter* and *experience* are perhaps even more critical factors.

What kinds of experience actually promote such personal growth? Without exception, participants agreed that the experiences involved in an active public presence are precisely those that can contribute to transformation. Several participants named the importance of sustained contact with “the other,” that is, the poor, the marginalized, those whose cultures and backgrounds are different from one’s own. Concrete action and activity toward the betterment of society are essential: “When we are engaged in ministries of action, we are ourselves transformed; when we aren’t, we are like Ezekiel’s dry bones.” One panelist articulated what appeared to be the group’s consensus that a concern for transformation must be focused on both the individual believer and the community of which he or she is a part. The merely therapeutic is insufficient, as is too much time spent in private reflection, contemplating only “*my* spirituality, *my* love.” Jesus, he reminded the group, “never let religion get in the way of helping people.”

Participants agreed that theological education must be about *continuing and accelerating the transforming activities begun prior to seminary*, although doing so may require different strategies for different age groups. What new learning experiences, the mainline group wondered, can seminaries provide that will help to transform students and enhance their commitment to ministries of public witness? Are there implications here for field education, internships, and other experience-based and intensive forms of education?

### ***Community/legacy***

Despite the widespread phenomenon of second-career, commuter students who no longer reside on campus, mainline seminaries are still *communities*, if ephemeral ones, in which the rich, familiar stories—the legacy of the family of God—are passed on. Religious communities, of course, can be both empowering and limiting; tradition can discourage change and transformation. Ideally, however, religious communities—particularly those of modernist heritage—receive their past with both gratitude and remorse, altering their behavior as new occasions and duties demand. Ideally, too, they are counter-cultural, embodying in some measure the values they profess and encouraging members to live out those values. For Christians, one panelist noted, history itself is “the process of forming a covenantal community relationship with those who have come before,” recognizing “not only what they said, but what they did. The important thing is to let our lives be critiqued by theirs—and vice versa.”

Mainline seminaries, in particular, share a historic “sense of legacy” as family members in the activist tradition of the Social Gospel (although one participant, an Episcopalian, argued that the task of “public interpretation” is an expectation of *all* Christians everywhere by virtue of their baptism). A broad curricular concern for the redemption of society, together with specific ministries of public presence and caring, are one way these schools “keep faith with those who have gone before.” But conference participants generally agreed that such “keeping faith” can happen effectively only if the mainline seminaries are prepared in some measure to *do* what they are trying to *teach*. In the words of one panelist, “We must be what we want to see. We teach primarily by who we are. So we must embody the kinds of activities that we want our graduates to do.” Representatives from two geographically and denominationally distinct schools also agreed about the need for modeling a different, even counter-cultural, kind of community on campus. Seminaries, they said, should offer “glimpses of communities that practice love, justice, and equality.” If so, it matters a great deal “*who* is called to teach at our schools”—specifically, practitioners of “socially engaged theology. And *this* means the need for institutional support for such activity.”

The role of the seminary as *modeling community* has obvious implications for curriculum. Because it is the role of ministers and priests to “equip the baptized with all they need to exercise their public ministries—the Christian story, told through Scriptures and formed in prayer, worship, and social service”—mainline schools must be places where men and women *learn how to equip others*. One panelist was adamant: being a minister is not about what he calls “surrogate Christianity”—that is, “you, as a minister, go out and act. It is about placing tools in the hands of the baptized to ready them for their own public ministries.”

### ***Devotional/spiritual practices***

Participants identified a variety of different practices that keep them centered, focused, and energized for public ministry. Not surprisingly many mentioned the personal need for regular times to pray, read the Bible and other devotional books, and meditate. Almost all participants pointed to the centrality of worship (both small- and large-group, spontaneous and formal); several noted the eucharist as especially important. One person specifically mentioned the related discipline of Sabbath-keeping, which for her represents a time to “step outside the dominant culture to gain a critical perspective on it.” Others named work itself—the joy of “seeing others ‘get it’”—as energizing. Several participants have “soul friends” or groups with whom they share devotional moments. Music and the arts, tithing, family pursuits, and hobbies all help to enable the participants’ public voice and presence.

Although their specific practices were quite diverse, each participant identified a clear link between devotional disciplines and public ministry: the private, contemplative moment feeds and encourages public action. All wondered: How might seminaries helpfully encourage students in these integrative practices and disciplines?

### ***Learning about the media***

All participants agreed that mainline seminary personnel—from faculty members to staff and administrators—generally need to learn how to deal with the media more effectively. This means both *approaching* the media to make the public aware of the seminary and its programs, and *responding* to media persons when they seek information from us. These are not easy tasks, especially when the issues at hand concern controversial matters about which our own denominations have no internal consensus. At the very least, one participant noted, we need to hire—and to value—skilled staff persons in our schools who can, among other things, help faculty members learn to speak briefly and pithily. Because “today’s news is done in sound bytes,” interviewers need short, interesting, and engaging responses. Such staff persons should be trained to be aggressive in promoting the seminary’s own public voice; we should “woo media people, rather than run from them.”

### **Additional Responses from a Broader Constituency**

The mainline group planned a follow-up luncheon at the ATS Biennial Meeting in Toronto in June 2000 to secure additional information from a wider group consisting of approximately eighty seminary presidents and deans. Randomly seated participants were asked to discuss three questions, take notes, and report briefly to the plenary about their conversations on the following:

1. How in your institution do you identify with the call for strengthening the public role of religious leadership?



2. What are the impediments that you see or experience in addressing this call at your institution?

3. What could or does help you move forward?

This discussion raised several substantive and cautionary issues that the mainline group will consider as it moves to complete Phase Two of the project and frame conclusions and recommendations.

***The need to define “public presence/public voice” with precision***

The whole matter of “public voice” or “public presence” is slippery for several reasons. First, “public voice” does not necessarily mean “one voice.” “Public voice” may encompass everything from passionate witness and civil disobedience to simple, non-partisan sharing of information. Social service and social justice activities are clearly both forms of public ministry—but, as one participant queried, “Are the ‘good old boys’ doing public leadership by working with the establishment of bankers, public and political leaders, et al.?” Any final recommendations must take into account the diversity among, and legitimacy of, various public ministries. Second, what is welcomed as an appropriate or important “public voice” in one mainline setting may be understood or received differently in another. For example, the kind of creative economic and community development programs now being pioneered by some urban African American churches might not be equally accepted in many Anglo/white churches. Finally, in encouraging public ministries we need to avoid the temptation to equate “public” with “prophetic” (or even simply with “social protest”).

***The importance of context and constituency***

A related issue is that context and constituency may be definitive in determining both the level and the nature of public presence. For example, because of their communities’ relative powerlessness, many African American (and some Hispanic) pastors have learned, out of necessity, how to marshal resources effectively to promote justice. Unlike many Anglo/white ministers in similar settings, these pastors often have active public ministries and regularly collaborate with secular community leadership. Because they can potentially influence their congregations’ voting practices, they may wield significant local and even regional power. From the perspective of educational practice, this means that recommendations to seminaries cannot be univocal, but must take into account cultural, regional, ethnic, and other forms of diversity.

***The relationship between church renewal and public presence***

Leadership in mainline churches today, especially white/Anglo churches, is often focused internally on keeping these communities alive. Consequently there is little perceived energy left for external or public ministries. People fear, moreover, that controversy of any sort—a predictable result of public activi-

ties—will inevitably produce losses in membership. To encourage greater attention to public ministries, we will need to convince people that social commitment and public involvement—even, sometimes, when they are controversial—are themselves means for congregational renewal when undertaken for the sake of the gospel.

### ***Financial matters***

Mainline seminaries, whether or not they are currently stable financially, must be careful not to alienate their primary bases of support. Seminary faculty—and especially seminary presidents—are understandably wary of taking actions that could anger donors and negatively affect the budgetary bottom line. This fear potentially limits the “prophetic” aspect of public ministry. Recommendations must take into account the need to promote forms of public ministry that will not alienate or alarm the financial friends of a school.

### ***Faculty matters***

Faculty tend to get their affirmation from members of their academic guilds and often are resistant to activities outside their disciplines. If seminaries want both to preach and to practice an enhanced public presence, they must find ways to support and encourage faculty members’ own public voices. This must include consideration of the rewards attached to salary, promotion, and tenure.

### ***Spreading the word about successful existing programs***

Many mainline leaders are unaware of the seminary programs that *are* in place to help shape students’ future public voice. These programs utilize a number of creative strategies that intentionally involve the seminaries with their various listening publics—for example, integrative and interactive events such as senior seminars in public theology, meetings between trustees and community leaders, donations of campus space to social service providers, internships, partnerships with external agencies, justice components within field education, teaching by public officials, and anti-racism work as a curricular requirement. Part of the problem is inadequate communication and networking among our schools. How can mainline seminaries more effectively share both their success stories and their failures? This question forms the basis of the second phase of the mainline project.

## **Strategizing for Change: Phase Two of the Project**

In keeping with our commitment to gather both data and ideas from practitioners, the mainline group plans to hold a conference with representatives of seven mainline seminaries that are already actively engaged in various

## *The Public Character of Mainline Theological Education*

components of public ministry. Participants will be asked to respond to and reflect on the question, *How does your school educate and engage in formation for public ministry?* (By “public ministry” we mean both public witness and public service, that is, ministries that may be understood as “prophetic” and potentially controversial as well as ministries of uncontroversial good works.) Participants will also be asked to reflect on these additional questions:

1. What is being done both in the formal curriculum and in co-curricular activities of your institution?
2. In theological terms, how do you understand the church’s mission in the world today?
3. How is the institutional strategy for public ministry of your institution related to the school’s mission or purpose statement?

Based on this consultation, our goal is to prepare a final report that will offer models, strategies, and other ideas that might encourage other mainline Protestant schools to reflect upon and address their own curricular efforts in the “public theology” arena of the ATS standards.

*Members of the mainline Protestant study group are: Elizabeth Nordbeck, chair, Andover Newton Theological School, Newton Centre, Massachusetts; Douglas Ottati, Union Theological Seminary and Presbyterian School of Christian Education, Richmond, Virginia; Martha Stortz, Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, Berkeley, California; and Fredrica Harris Thompsett, Episcopal Divinity School, Cambridge, Massachusetts.*

### ENDNOTES

1. The obscure term probably alludes to the main or grand trunk line of a railroad, with its smaller side branches.
2. Panel One consisted of Sheryl Kujawa, professor, Episcopal Divinity School; Rebecca Parker, president, Starr King School for the Ministry; and Wilson Yates, president, United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities. Panel Two included William Briggs (UCC), former Conference Minister and presently director of an ecumenical center; Jeffrey Brown (American Baptist Churches), pastor and activist in the African American community; and Kerri Walker (Presbyterian), Christian educator. Panel Three included Evan Golder (UCC), editor, *United Church News*; Robert Brooks (Episcopal), Canon to the Bishop for International Affairs of the Diocese of El Salvador; and Dean Snyder (United Methodist), Communications Officer, Baltimore-Washington Conference. Jack Stotts of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary served as reflector.



# The Public Character of the University-Related Divinity School

*Principal writers for the University-Related Divinity School Study Group:*

*Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, Vanderbilt University Divinity School*

*Robin W. Lovin, Perkins School of Theology Southern Methodist University*

*Richard J. Wood, Yale University Divinity School*

*ABSTRACT: This article will describe the social and historical location that provides the context for university-related theological education and then explore three distinctive elements of a university divinity school's public voice and presence: (1) a new opening for theological scholarship in contemporary intellectual life, (2) an ecumenical and interreligious dialogue that reflects the diversity of the university community and the theological school, and (3) a collaboration with other disciplines and professional schools that provides a more comprehensive view of key issues for the human future. In this third area, especially, university-related theological schools must relate to the university as a primary public as one means to reach the larger public.*

What is the appropriate public role for the university-situated divinity school? In what ways should theological education within a university attend to and influence social, political, and moral issues that shape the school, the students educated within the school, and the community in which the school is located? While university divinity schools share many features with other types of theological schools, they also occupy a unique position that offers both opportunity and challenge. They are subject to the same cultural forces that make it difficult for all theological schools to maintain a public presence at the end of the twentieth century, but they also have unique possibilities as a result of their location in modern research universities.

Much has been written in recent years on the relationship between faith and scholars and on the public voice of religion.<sup>1</sup> This literature provided the background for many of the discussions in the working group of university-related divinity schools that is part of the Project on the Public Character of Theological Education. This article, however, is not intended as a contribution to that literature. Here, we focus on the ways in which these changes affect university theological schools in particular, and on the constructive responses that are possible in a university context. While university-related schools are situated in a context that is irreducibly public, the implications of claims about

public theology for theological education still need to be more carefully articulated.

### **The University Context**

In a way, the companion articles in this issue on Evangelical, Mainline, and Roman Catholic theological education resemble “position papers” or “mission statements.” They define fundamental presuppositions, key religious beliefs, and distinct religious patterns that are shaped by the traditions that these theological schools serve. As one might expect, theological concepts such as “conversionism,” “social commitment,” and “sacramentality” shape the kinds of answers given to the question of the public nature of theological education in Evangelical, Mainline, and Roman Catholic seminaries.

By contrast, university divinity schools typically lack this confessional consensus. With faculty of increasingly diverse religious persuasions and a student body equally diverse in both background and vocational aspirations, most university divinity schools cannot draw on a particular religious tradition to shape their understanding of their own public presence. Instead, as diversity among faculty and students has intensified in the last few decades, university divinity schools birthed the idea of the importance of “public theology” as a sort of substitute for confessional identity. Discussion of “public theology” or “public religion” functioned within these schools as a way to articulate consensus about their complex role in society and their mission in theological education.

The faculty and students within university-related divinity schools have not always been so inclusive as the language of public theology might suggest. To risk oversimplification, the four working groups in this ATS initiative to explore the public character of theological education actually comprise one Catholic group and three variations on Protestantism—evangelical, mainline, and university schools. The oldest and most visible university-related divinity schools have Protestant roots and, roughly speaking, these schools have evolved through three general stages, from an initial Protestant liberalism at the beginning of the twentieth century, through Protestant ecumenism in the 1950s and '60s, to the current move toward a more genuinely inter-religious theological education in the 1990s.

This evolution is most clear in the four university schools—Yale, Harvard, Chicago, and Vanderbilt—that are now non-denominational. Each began as a bastion of Protestantism, with formal or informal ties to particular denominational traditions, whether Puritan/Congregational, Unitarian, Baptist, or Methodist. They sought independent status as a means to greater academic freedom and, as important, in a move to benefit from nonsectarian support. James H. Kirkland, Vanderbilt’s second chancellor, for example, shepherded a split from Methodist control in 1914 in a bid for national recognition and Rockefeller,

Carnegie, and Vanderbilt funds designated for institutions independent of ecclesiastical governance.

To be sure, this was not a one-directional movement. Some universities, notably Emory and Southern Methodist University, founded theological schools expressly to maintain the denominational connections that Vanderbilt had severed. Others found ways to maintain academic freedom along with confessional commitment. Catholic theological schools affiliated with universities followed their own path, shaped by the changes wrought at Vatican II and controversies over the meaning of the church's magisterium, as well as by the cultural tendency toward increasingly secular education that affected their Protestant counterparts.

A trend toward religious diversity is also apparent across the variety of institutional arrangements. Faculties that only a few decades ago were largely composed of white, Protestant males now reflect a rich variety of perspectives, not only in terms of religious beliefs but also in terms of gender, race, and ethnic backgrounds. The initial addition of Catholic faculty is now augmented by the push to establish other arenas of expertise, such as Jewish, Islamic, or Native American. Granted, most institutions are far from non-Christian in either make-up or constituency. They still harbor a predilection to put Protestant Christian traditions into conversation with these "other" traditions. But they are far removed from the Protestant institutions that they once were.

Schools like Vanderbilt or Yale still attract students from particular denominational constituencies, but they are now likely to draw students from a great variety of Christian and non-Christian traditions as well. University divinity schools in general are particularly attractive to persons either unaffiliated with a particular tradition or actively disenfranchised from a tradition, either through some kind of personal or religious crisis or by doctrines within the tradition itself, with non-ordination of women being a prime example. Students ranging from very conservative believers to agnostic seekers are attracted by the academic reputations of these schools and by the opportunity to grapple seriously with fundamental religious questions in a context free from tight normative or doctrinal horizons or boundaries.

Weekly worship is sometimes the most revealing place where varying religious commitments come into tension. While these institutions usually still hold weekly services, the worship committee might include a Baptist, an atheist, a Jew, an Episcopalian contemplating Catholicism, and an African Methodist Episcopal minister.<sup>2</sup> In the classroom itself, religious commitments and intellectual exploration are not seen as mutually exclusive. Indeed, open and critical examination is said to lead to a more authentic grasp of faith. Even those divinity schools that maintain denominational ties do not teach exclusively from a confessional point of view. This is particularly true in Canada, where access to government funding for theological education has encouraged university affiliations and consortial arrangements in which theological schools

## *The Public Character of the University-Related Divinity School*

maintain a distinctive denominational identity while providing instruction to students across the ecumenical spectrum.

As a result of their mixture of denominational and university histories, university theological schools reflect some of the problems that have characterized both institutional contexts. In particular, the historically Protestant schools have been impacted by the decline of mainstream Protestantism. While most have been somewhat successful in expanding their denominational base and the range of vocational preparation they provide, they have not changed the public perception of their identification with mainline Protestantism. They share its decline of broader cultural influence.

In addition, the university-related theological schools have been affected by changes in higher education. While their history goes back to the beginnings of higher education in North America, their present situation is shaped particularly by the development of the modern research university from the late nineteenth century onward. They have experienced—in addition to the particular questions this context addresses to religious belief—the general problems of humanistic studies in finding a place for themselves in an environment dominated by the hard sciences. The humanities in general have had to face criticism of their “ivory tower” status and the seeming irrelevance of abstract intellectualizing to the pressing problems of the broader society. The question of public character and public presence, which dominates the introspection of the divinity schools, is, in fact, a question faced by other scholars across the boundaries of university disciplines, particularly those disciplines less obviously promoting the technological, economic infrastructures of postindustrial capitalism.

In spite of these problems, the university context offers notable benefits as a location for theological scholarship. The visibility of major universities makes the task of public presence somewhat easier for university-related schools. Being in a university facilitates and even forces a public voice by bringing to the theological school name recognition and media access greater than freestanding schools. The media and political leaders tend to call upon known schools and recognized faculty for comment and advice. Most university-based theological schools also have particular opportunities for interdisciplinary and interprofessional discourse. The presence of professional schools, such as law, medicine, and nursing, and other departments, such as anthropology, philosophy, and political science, offer the chance to address the public through the complex public already represented by the university itself.

On this score, perhaps the most noteworthy observation about the current context of the university-related divinity school is a relatively positive change in the cultural climate as increasingly receptive to the possible contributions of religion scholars and increasingly hospitable to religious institutions.<sup>3</sup> This welcoming attitude is by no means universal, but the days are gone when scientism reduced religious beliefs to childish delusions, academic norms



excluded consideration of religious beliefs, and separation of church and state left no place for the contributions of faith communities to public life.

The emergence of the research university into a postmodern intellectual milieu, in which the Enlightenment and positivist presuppositions of its search for knowledge have been called into question, creates a new and more hopeful intellectual environment for the university-related theological school. This climate opens up new possibilities for a public presence for these schools. At the same time that university theological schools find themselves marginalized in a wider public that sees them simply as part of a declining empire of mainstream Protestantism, the opening discourse across methodological and disciplinary boundaries within the university creates an important new public for the theological school. In other words, university-related divinity schools have a demanding “public” to address right within their own universities. While this university public is not the only public that university-related schools need to consider, it is an increasingly important one.

### **Theological Scholarship**

On the basis of this brief survey of the context of university-related theological education, we may return to the three elements of the university divinity school’s public voice that we identified at the beginning of this essay. First, there is the new openness to religious ideas in the university and, as a result, the distinctive contribution that theological scholarship can make to contemporary intellectual life.

Theological scholarship remains the central enterprise of university-based divinity schools. For the better part of the twentieth century this scholarship, in all its varieties, struggled for acceptance in a scientific, critical intellectual culture, and especially in the environment of the research university. Until quite recently, the Enlightenment myth of value-free, completely objective intellectual inquiry significantly undermined scholarship that started from a religiously committed position. The hyper-scientific approach to scholarship marginalized and privatized religious faith, interpreting it as an expression of personal preference or community practice with little or no importance for public choices or the academic search for truth. Religious beliefs and practices, it was held, had no role in so-called “objective” inquiry.

As the prior section observed, this myth has been significantly undermined in recent years. Leading secular philosophers, such as Wilfred Sellars and Richard Rorty, feminist theorists, such as Evelyn Fox Keller and Sandra Harding, as well as historians of science, such as Thomas Kuhn, have established that the relationship between careful observation, rich description, and the values that govern choices about what is observed and described is extremely complex.<sup>4</sup> While objectivity has not been entirely debunked as a proper perspective for academic study, understandings of intellectual objec-

tivity have shifted to include the impact of context, location, community, traditions, and beliefs on the achievement of objective knowledge.<sup>5</sup> If objectivity is a goal that inquiry approaches, therefore, and not a starting point, theological scholarship has the potential to be as “objective” in this sense as any other field of disciplined inquiry.

This pervasive change in the modern intellectual climate opens up space for the public presence and voice of scholars in university-related theological schools, but it also multiplies the audiences to whom they must attempt, often simultaneously, to speak. Characteristically, university-situated schools are involved, in varying ways, in both the professional education of ministers and in the academic education of Ph.D. students. The ability to participate in doctoral teaching then is an important dimension of the selection and hiring of faculty. Some schools have primary responsibility for staffing and administering doctoral programs in religious studies. Others provide a significant part of the faculty for the Christian studies part of religious studies in a separate graduate department of religion. In either case, faculty often serve dual or even triple functions. That is, they not only shape doctoral study but also contribute to the theological education of ministers and/or to the liberal arts education of undergraduates.

As a result, distinct from freestanding seminaries and theological schools, university-based theological schools have a public mediational and interpretative role thrust on them by their institutional environment. On the one hand, they have an important responsibility to interpret congregational and religious practices and beliefs to the university. On the other hand, they must interpret the scholarship of the university to those within religious communities and beyond. This public mediational and interpretative role requires a certain disciplinary and methodological self-consciousness about religion, faith, and the study of religion and faith that allows faculty to speak to both the religiously disenfranchised and to the religiously faithful and converted.

One important aspect of this interpretative, mediational role is simply making critical assessments and raising questions about a tradition and its beliefs that those in denominational seminaries are less free to undertake. All too often, faculty in seminaries subject to ecclesial controversy or denominational scrutiny must agree with one participant in these ATS conversations who observed that “there are certain matters that we simply no longer talk about in my seminary.”<sup>6</sup> Part of the mission of theological schools in universities is to raise questions and concerns that more formally religious-affiliated schools cannot raise in their own more focused contexts.

At the same time, on the university front, another important aspect of the theological scholar’s role is to make convincing arguments for the validity of what scholars of religion and theology do. Put quite simply, religion scholars have to convince others that religious beliefs can be studied with the same seriousness that the university devotes to other intellectual claims. In other words, they have to establish that theological scholarship is an important

enterprise distinct from the kind of reflection that occurs in faith communities and distinct from investigations of religion under the rubric of another discipline such as anthropology or literature. In a word, the dominant role of these schools in theological research and preparation of Ph.D. students forces them to be more explicit and differentiated in their understanding of the nature and purpose of theological scholarship to the academic public and the nature and purpose of the study of religion to the congregational or religious public.

### **Ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogue**

A second distinctive role and responsibility for the university theological schools is already implied by the diversity within the schools and by the renewed possibility for genuine scholarship with equally genuine confessional presuppositions. University theological schools are uniquely situated to foster ecumenical and interreligious dialogue that reflects both the diversity of the university community and the theological school's deeper exploration of the specific traditions included in that community.

The university-related theological schools are in a position to explore the convergence and differences between religious communities on basic public issues—justice, equality, the relationship between community and individual responsibility, environmental concerns, etc. We know (partly on the basis of scholarship in religious studies) that religious traditions are very important in shaping values and attitudes on these issues. It seems likely, therefore, that public consensus on these important questions in a diverse society will depend in part on communication and mutual understanding between religious traditions and communities.

The framework for this ecumenical and interreligious communication is not a generalized "religious" understanding of the issues, still less a secularized notion of "values" that shape public policy, but a deeper understanding of the role that particular religious and theological traditions give to human welfare and human society through their specific understandings of the human relationship to the divine. In *The Death of Character*, James Davidson Hunter argues that efforts to base moral education and moral discussion on general "values," disconnected from particular religious traditions, has been a total failure.<sup>7</sup> An education that reconnects public policy and personal moral convictions does not involve constructing the kind of general religious unity often assumed by the term "ecumenism." It requires conversing ecumenically across and through differences. Such conversation requires a re-learning of one's own primary religious language, even as it requires greater awareness of the religious languages of others. University-related theological schools are, by the diversity of their faculties and student bodies, important contexts in which these efforts can take place and their curricula are attuned to the variety of religious languages that must be part of the conversation.

This re-learning is a neglected possibility, partly because university theological schools, like mainline Protestant schools generally, have gradually lost many of their working connections to real religious communities. University theological schools continue to be important centers for the exploration of traditions and theologies, but they are not always effective in communicating these explorations back to the primary communities where they are needed. They have become disconnected from some of the obvious channels for influencing the religious communities to which they relate.<sup>8</sup>

### **A Probing and Possibly Prophetic Role in Collaboration**

The discussions that are possible for a university-related theological school are not confined to explorations of the nature of theological discourse (section 2) or ecumenical and interreligious dialogue between religious traditions (section 3). An appropriate, but often underdeveloped public voice for theological school faculty is to work with colleagues in other schools to raise and explore the fundamental, and often deeply religious, questions that arise in public discussions of biomedicine, democracy and human rights, business and globalization, and so forth. Many of the most important opportunities for these schools and some of the most interesting experiments on their campuses seek to establish connections with other disciplines and other forms of professional education within the university. The university itself is the first “public” for these discussions, since they often involve educating the rest of the university about the significance of religion and about the nature of theological education. Effective development of these opportunities with the university “public” promises, moreover, to provide ways to reach the wider public where theological education remains largely unknown.

There are many examples of this sort of collaboration in university-related theological schools. We might even see it as the distinctive activity of the university-related theological school at the end of the twentieth century. These collaborations have implications beyond their host schools, because they often also create opportunities for scholars from other non-university theological faculties to participate in research and develop an academic audience for their work. Three sorts of efforts have arisen: (1) interdisciplinary conferences on specific subjects that involve theological themes or relate to religious institutions and communities, (2) on-going institutional collaborations that link scholarship and professional practice across disciplines, and (3) research projects that provide an interdisciplinary focus on key institutions and issues, and include major attention to religion.

As an example in the first category, recently Yale University Divinity School joined with the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies in sponsorship of a major conference, “The Good in Nature and Humanity: Connecting Science, Religion, and the Natural World.” Participants in the

conference—scientists, social scientists, and specialists in religion alike—shared the basic premise that religious perspectives and questions would enrich the understanding of important environmental issues. In a similar fashion, the University of Chicago Divinity School recently hosted a conference, “The Sacred and The Sovereign,” in which a diverse and distinguished group of scholars in theology, ethics, the military, and political science examined the complex set of issues around human rights, religious commitment, national sovereignty, and humanitarian intervention. For more than ten years, Southern Methodist University’s (SMU) Perkins School of Theology has cooperated with the SMU School of Law and the University of Texas’s Southwestern Medical Center to present an annual “Conference of the Professions” that brings clergy, lawyers, and physicians together to study a topic of public importance.

While all these conferences are one-time efforts to put religious understandings of serious public issues on the table, longer-term programs of collaborative study have developed in a number of institutions. Both Emory University, with the contributions of faculty at Candler School of Theology and other university faculty, and Vanderbilt University Divinity and Law Schools, offer joint degree programs of law and religion. Emory describes the heart of its program as a dialectical relationship between religion and law “designed to explore the religious dimensions of law, the legal dimensions of religion, and the interaction of legal and religious ideas and methods.” Both religion and law have distinct contributions in this conversation: “religion gives law its spirit and inspires its adherence to ritual, tradition, and justice. Law gives religion its structure and encourages its devotion to order, organization, and orthodoxy.”<sup>9</sup>

More recently, Vanderbilt University initiated the Cal Turner Program in Moral Leadership for the Professions in 1996 as a university-wide program dedicated to the discussion and promotion of moral values relevant to the professional schools and the practice of the professions. The program links the schools of business, law, medicine, and religion and coordinates both university and wider community events and initiatives. In 2000, Duke University Divinity School founded The Duke Institute on Care at the End of Life as an interdisciplinary effort to promote research, guide public policy, and improve services for the dying on the part of a wide range of caregivers, from clergy to health care providers to lay volunteers. The Divinity School of the University of Chicago established The Martin Marty Center in 1998 with an even broader mandate to study the importance of public religion.<sup>10</sup> The Marty Center brings scholars pursuing advanced research in religion into active conversation with public groups drawn from faith communities, the professions, civil society, and other parts of higher education. It does so from the conviction that the best and most innovative scholarship in religion and theology emerges from sustained dialogue with the wider society.

## *The Public Character of the University-Related Divinity School*

Both conferences and programs obviously have significant research components. Our final example of collaboration, however, centers primarily on research. The Religion, Culture, and Family Project, directed by Don Browning at The Divinity School of The University of Chicago, is an example of such research collaboration. Funded in coordination with the Louisville Institute by a generous grant from Lilly Endowment Inc., it seeks to address the contemporary situation of American families from a range of historical, legal, biblical, and cultural perspectives. Guided by the claim that religious traditions have valuable theological, ethical, and institutional resources to help revitalize North American family culture and families, the project has produced a number of major books authored by more than 100 leading family and religion scholars, and has sponsored conferences, scholarly and popular articles, and media projects.<sup>12</sup>

Many of the conferences and programs through which university-related theological schools make more visible contributions to public discussions focus on policy questions. They become a persuasive reminder, first to the university “public” and then to the wider community, that theological studies offer important resources for answering the questions that legislators, policy makers, and social critics have posed. One of the most important areas for collaboration, however, lies in the framing of the questions themselves. In some cases, public issues cannot be fully understood without recourse to basic theological understandings of human relationships and the human condition. Where these are neglected, the policy solutions will necessarily be inadequate or superficial.

Perhaps the clearest example of this in recent history is the work of the “Truth and Reconciliation Commission” that helped to set the moral and legal terms for dealing with the legacy of apartheid in South Africa. A theological understanding of the conditions for forgiveness, reconciliation, and future unity provided in this case the framework for the policy discussion itself, and not just a theological answer to the policy makers’ questions.<sup>11</sup> The large part that churches, religious leaders, and theologians played in these developments suggests an important part of the public character of religious life that deserves further exploration in North American theological education. Are there public issues around which our theological schools might contribute to a resolution by reframing the discussion in theological terms? If so, how would they create a forum in which those concepts might be learned and tested? The public available to a theological school within its own university may be one place where these questions can be opened for discussion.

The possibilities are by no means confined to “truth” and “reconciliation.” Other key theological concepts that have equally important implications for public discussion include “forgiveness,” “promise-keeping” or “fidelity,” and “remembrance.” As a result of the influence of movements in South Africa, the impact of the Holocaust and work of Elie Wiesel<sup>13</sup> and others, and other related

developments, there is broad cultural agreement now about the need to remember the evil committed and suffered, honoring those who suffered in the past and seeking to protect the innocent in the future. Side by side with recognition of the importance of memory is recognition of its ambiguity, its potential for perpetrating violence as much as allaying it, and its contradictory interpretations. Exploration of such theological themes requires both a deeper understanding of their place in theological traditions (as in section 2 above) and a more attentive listening across the disciplines to discussions about the future of human community, both local and international.

As a second step in the effort to explore the public character of university-related theological schools, our working group plans to sponsor two conferences at Duke University Divinity School and Emmanuel College of Victoria University around the themes of “memory and forgiveness.” The conferences will be focused around two specific historical issues: slavery in the United States and the treatment of indigenous peoples in Canada.

The project at Emmanuel College will focus particularly on the legal, political, and philosophical debate surrounding Christian residential schools. This discussion involves complex questions of guilt, blame, responsibility, and justice, as well as repentance and reconciliation. The aim will be not only to study these important public moral questions, but also to observe what happens when those who speak the language of theology talk with those from other departments of the university who have both special scholarly expertise and particular commitments as members of faith communities.

Duke University Divinity School, on the other hand, will address the thorny intellectual, political, and practical challenges of racial reconciliation. This effort is designed to challenge the wider public to think and talk differently about important public issues and dilemmas, responding not only to directions for policy, but also to their most deeply held understandings of human nature and the possibilities for human community. In such collaborations, theological scholarship has the potentially prophetic role of dissolving fixed political commitments and recalling persons to a vision of community more in keeping with their basic commitments to justice.

A future issue of *Theological Education* will report on these conferences and suggest further implications for theological scholarship and the shape of the theological curriculum. We also anticipate using the results of the two campus-based conferences on “memory and forgiveness” to plan a larger and more visible public discussion, thus illustrating (we hope) the movement from the university “public” to the wider public where theology and theological education need to become more visible.

To return to a fundamental question that sparked the ATS project: How will a curriculum that takes into consideration the public character of theological education look differently? What in particular will faculty, students, and courses do? What about the “hidden curriculum” beyond the classroom?

## *The Public Character of the University-Related Divinity School*

Important curricular implications emerge in each of the three areas of responsibility discussed above. If convincing public theological scholarship is one of the distinct contributions of university-related divinity schools, then a primary focus of teaching includes seizing upon reading, writing, and speaking exercises not as mere course requirements but as part of the formation of public presence and voice. University divinity schools must build on their long traditions of educating people for public and community service through a variety of legal and social organizations by exploring the relevance of theological insights in these settings. Likewise, greater intentionality about interreligious understanding and communication is of utmost importance internal to the divinity school itself. Even though Baptists, Jews, Pentecostals, and Unitarian Universalists sit side by side in class, they may neither know the rich resources of their own traditions nor reach any kind of understanding of the traditions of the persons next to them. Exploration of one's own traditions and dialogue with others will not happen without explicit curricular design. Finally, university-based divinity schools have created a rich variety of self-standing centers and institutions in their midst perhaps without enough attention to the impact of these collaborative cross-disciplinary, cross-institutional programs on their students and the curriculum itself. These programs have great potential to help students bridge the gap between theory and practice, private and public, research and life that has often been the bane of university education.

*Members of the university-related divinity school study group included: Richard J. Wood, chair, Yale University Divinity School, New Haven, Connecticut; Phyllis D. Airhart, Emmanuel College of Victoria University, Toronto, Ontario; Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, Vanderbilt University Divinity School, Nashville, Tennessee; Clarence G. Newsome, Howard University Divinity School, Washington, DC; and Miroslav Volf, Yale University Divinity School, New Haven, Connecticut.*

### ENDNOTES

1. For example, books on faith and scholarship include such works as Mark Schwehn, *Exiles from Eden: Religion and the Academic Vocation in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Douglas Sloan, *Faith and Knowledge: Mainline Protestantism and American Higher Education* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994); Conrad Cherry, *Hurrying toward Zion: Universities, Divinity Schools, and American Protestantism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995); George M. Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); and James Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from Their Christian Churches* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). Other books on the public voice of religion include such works as Paul J. Weitham, ed., *Religion and Contemporary Liberalism* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1997); Robert Audi and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Religion in the Public Square: The Place of Religious Convictions in Political Debate* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997); Ronald F. Thiemann, *Religion in Public Life: A Dilemma for Democracy* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1996).



*The Public Character of the University-Related Divinity School*

2. See, for example Carol Orsborn, *Return From Exile: One Woman's Journey Back to Judaism* (New York: Continuum, 1998).
3. For a review of recent books representative of the trend toward a more balanced and appreciative account of religion's role in liberal democracy, see Brian Stiltner, "Reassessing Religion's Place in a Liberal Democracy," *Religious Studies Review* 26, no. 4 (October 2000): 319-25.
4. See Wilfrid Sellars, Richard Rorty, and Robert Brandom, eds., *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Evelyn Fox Keller, *Reflections on Gender and Science*, 10th ed., (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996); and Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?: Thinking from Women's Lives* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).
5. See Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983).
6. Informal conversation in the course of the ATS project.
7. James Davison Hunter, *The Death of Character: Moral Education in an Age Without Good or Evil* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).
8. See "Theme Introduction" to this issue, page xiv.
9. See Website: [http://serv1.law.emory.edu/religion/about/about\\_start.htm](http://serv1.law.emory.edu/religion/about/about_start.htm)
10. See Carrie B. Dohe and Jonathan Ebel, eds., "Public Religion Project: Assessing Public Religion in the United States," Occasional Papers, Vol. 1, The Martin Marty Center (2000).
11. Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999); James Cochrane, John deGruchy, and Stephen Martin, eds., *Facing the Truth: South African Community and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1999).
12. For information on publications and projects of the Religion, Culture, and Family Project, see Website: <http://www.uchicago.edu/divinity/family>
13. See Elie Wiesel, *From the Kingdom of Memory: Reminiscences* (New York: Summit Books, 1990).



# A Contextual Theology of Leadership

*Diane Kennedy, O.P.*

*Aquinas Institute of Theology*

*This article was adapted from an address to the ATS Women in Leadership consultation in October 2000. The consultation convened all who had participated in the three-year Women in Leadership program events that were supported by the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation.*

The arrival of women in significant numbers into the world of theological education is a phenomenon of the last thirty years. First they came as students and gradually joined the faculties. Even more gradually they assumed roles in administration. Today women are a strong infrastructure in roles of finance, development, student services, recruitment, admissions, and public relations. And some, though a much smaller number, now exercise senior leadership as presidents and deans.

When I was invited to articulate a theology of leadership from my experience as a chief academic officer, I was aware that my role as dean is a work in progress and that my theology of leadership is emerging through an inductive process. So I decided that my minority experience as a woman dean demanded the method of contextual theology.

Contextual theology is an attempt to understand Christian faith in terms of a particular context. The context from which I attempt to articulate a theology of leadership, from which I seek to word my faith experience, is ten years of service as a woman dean of a small but growing Roman Catholic graduate school of theology located on the campus of a large university. Stephen Bevans has written that contextual theology is “unabashedly subjective”—not in the sense of private or relative, but rather “points to the human person or human society, culturally and historically bound as it is, as the source of reality.”<sup>1</sup> Hence, to develop a theology of leadership I must turn to my experience as a dean who happens to be a woman and interpret the reality of leadership from this particular horizon and these particular thought forms, in this historical, ecclesial moment.

## The Context of Aquinas Institute

Five aspects of the context of Aquinas Institute must be considered: the character of the student community; the grounding in the Dominican tradition; the blessings and challenges of sustained, fast-paced growth of an institution; our relationship with the local church; and the present moment of ferment and new initiatives occasioned by the work of ATS and the resources of Lilly Endowment.

***The student community***

The student community of Aquinas mirrors the changing, diverse faces of Catholic ministers: old and young, clergy and religious, seminarians and lay women and men, racially and culturally diverse. This emergent reality reflects the shortage of priests in the Catholic Church, the decreased number of seminarians, and at the same time the extraordinary flourishing of new life in the laity's response to the call to ministry. In 1976 in the U.S. Catholic Church there was no record of lay pastoral ministers; in 1999 the official statistics record 30,000 lay pastoral ministers working in parishes. Within that intergenerational community we embody the contemporary demographics of ministry: eighty percent of lay students are over forty years of age; eighty percent of seminarians tend to be under forty. Seminarians tend to be more conservative theologically and more concerned, and a little anxious, about defining the role of clergy over against the role of the lay minister. Many of our most gifted students are women, often married with children. The new demographics of ministry have occasioned the development of a lay spiritual formation program to integrate spiritual formation and ministerial development in laymen and women preparing to serve the church as lay leaders. The church has centuries of experience in priestly and religious formation, but in this new moment we must shape programs from a lay spirituality and for discernment of the call to ministry. Psychological and spiritual assessment, formerly required only of seminarians and religious men and women, has become an integral part of the lay spiritual formation program.

***In the Dominican tradition***

Aquinas Institute is a school of theology in the Dominican tradition. Since its founding in the early thirteenth century, the Order of Preachers has been an order of women and men. Dominic gathered the women into monasteries as contemplative nuns and sent the friars to study at universities to prepare for their life as itinerant preachers. The roles assigned to the women and men were shaped by their historical, cultural context. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries Dominican sisters taught in the arts and sciences in colleges and universities while the Dominican men specialized in philosophy and theology. In the past thirty years Dominican women have joined their brothers as theologians and have been welcomed onto the faculty. In fact, by 1981 Aquinas Institute had adopted a hiring policy that incorporated the principle of gender balance as a factor in new hirings. At present the Aquinas faculty numbers nineteen regular members: nine and one-half men and nine and one-half women. (A married couple shares one full-time position.) The gender balance reflects the sustained commitment of the institution to collaboration of men and women in the leadership, culture, and ecclesial vision of Aquinas. The Dominican tradition of governance is democratic and collegial. Hence, while Aquinas Institute is owned by one province of Dominican men, one other

province of men and eight congregations of Dominican women sponsor Aquinas by modest funding and provision of personnel. This familial grace is at the heart of the Aquinas ecclesiology, our “way of being church.” In the cultural paradigm shifts of the present historical moment, the “original grace” of the founding charism that drew both men and women into the Order of Preachers has flourished in new roles and relationships.

### ***Blessings and challenges of growth***

Aquinas Institute is enjoying the blessings, challenges, and tensions of a period of sustained, often fast-paced growth. That growth is rooted in the Aquinas tradition of responsiveness to the needs of the Church. In the past six years we have introduced three new degrees: the Doctor of Ministry in Preaching, the distance learning Master of Arts in Pastoral Ministry, and the most recent Master of Arts in Health Care Mission—as well as two new certificate programs in Spiritual Direction and Pastoral Care. Our enrollment has more than doubled, and this fall we added four new faculty members. This growth reflects an entrepreneurial spirit as well as an ecclesial commitment. It has involved a paschal pattern that demands a willingness to suffer through the destabilizing moments of change and transformation—the ability to “undergo” conflict, resistance, and work toward new life. The faculty has stretched to develop new programs and new modes of pedagogy amid building renovation, increased class size, and a growing population of Generation X students. Such a time of growth is a high-stress situation that demands intentional leadership. Donna Markham’s concept of Spirit-linking leadership offers a conceptual frame for the challenge of such a moment:

Spiritlinking leadership is the deliberate and untiring act of working through resistance to organizational transformation by building the circle of friends, fostering networks of human compassion and interweaving teams of relationships through which new ideas are born and new ways of responding to the mission take form and find expression. . . . Such leadership is directed toward networking, community forming and coalition building across chasms of ideological differences.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Relationship with the local church***

As a progressive school of theology in a theologically conservative archdiocese, we live in potential tension with that church leadership. We have heard that Aquinas Institute is viewed as a “feminist” school. Is it the presence of women in administration, on faculty, and as students that makes Aquinas a feminist school? Sometimes the concern is framed more directly and more sharply: Does Aquinas promote the teaching of the Church on the ordination of women? And our response is candid and careful: Everyone at Aquinas knows the official teaching of the Church; it is the task of a graduate school of

theology to set forth the tradition of Church teaching and to engage that tradition with the critical theological and pastoral questions of the day—and to help shape that tradition.

At Aquinas Institute we labor to keep the ecclesial tension creative and to maintain communication to foster understanding. A recent event will serve to concretize how we live within that tension. For almost two decades it had been the custom at Aquinas that the women theologians on faculty rotated in the preaching schedule with the priests on faculty to preach at the weekly Eucharists. This practice developed out of our particular context. At Aquinas, as members of the Order of Preachers, we understand preaching or homiletics to be an integrative discipline wherein the study of Scripture and theology come together with pastoral experience within a community of faith. The women theologians model this integration from women's pastoral experience. Moreover, many of our women students will be called to preach on occasions such as a Service of the Word in a parish, retreats, or wake services. Women faculty serve as models and mentors for these future ministers. Such was the pastoral understanding that shaped the Aquinas practice of women faculty preaching at the Eucharist.

When a new archbishop became aware of the Aquinas practice, he met with our president. The president set forth the reasons for this pastoral practice—assuredly a moment of “contextual theology”—and asked the archbishop for special permission or exemption to allow this inclusion of women in preaching in a school whose student community is fifty percent women. The archbishop felt we should abide by “normative practice” and thus denied the permission.

At the next faculty meeting the president shared the news of the archbishop's decision. Distress, frustration, dismay, and anger were quickly expressed. Eventually one faculty member offered, “Our students are going to be hitting walls like this in their ministries. Why don't we try to model for them how such inevitable difficulties might be handled creatively, obediently, without yielding to rage, anger, and cynicism?”

And so we decided to have non-Eucharistic liturgies on Tuesdays, at which the women faculty preside and preach, and Eucharistic liturgies on Thursdays. We resolved, in our obedience to preach more not less, to find more opportunities outside Eucharist to let women's experience mediate the Word. At the one remaining Eucharist of the spring semester at which a woman was scheduled to preach—the ban would be put into effect when the new liturgical calendar began in the fall semester—the woman professor who had been teaching homiletics at Aquinas for twenty-three years preached “the last homily.” The reading from Acts for that day in the Easter cycle proclaimed the experience of the first Christian community in tension with the authorities: “But Peter and John answered them, Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.” And the assembly laughed and delighted

in the ironic humor hidden in God's Word. I dare to say that we live in creative fidelity with the local church, confident of the power of God's Spirit to comfort, strengthen, and guide.

### *New initiatives and abundant resources*

All theological schools today are profoundly affected by the challenge of the new ATS Standards of Accreditation and the resources available to us from Lilly Endowment. The ATS focus on excellence and the importance of leadership combined with the Lilly Endowment's commitment to strengthening teaching and learning in theological education serve as catalysts to creative visioning and strategic planning. Because of the Lilly Endowment initiative on congregational leadership, Aquinas has embarked upon a project geared to attract Generation Xers to ministry as a "first career." In just two years the critical mass of these younger, very talented lay scholars has begun to serve as a transforming element in the community. They bring new needs and offer new challenges that are a pressure for change. This pressure combines with the ATS/Lilly Endowment focus on pedagogy and assessment to keep us attentive to the necessity of continual striving for greater excellence in theological education.

### **Toward a Theology of Leadership**

These five aspects of the Aquinas experience have both shaped and stretched my understanding of not only the role of leader but also the kind of leadership that is needed. That understanding assumes certain theological perspectives: discernment of charisms, a theology of transformation, a theology of reconciliation, the prophetic vocation, and reading the signs of the times.

### *Discernment of charisms*

Facilitating the growth and development of a diverse, intergenerational community of learning demands a recognition that the Spirit is entrusting the gifts necessary for the life of the church to the community—in new and wonderful places—and calls for the wise discernment of charisms. Vatican II's vision of the universal call to holiness being rooted in the consecration of baptism has not only summoned new faces to professional ministry but has demanded a theology of lay spirituality and lay ministry that has formed the lay spiritual formation programs. The role of leadership is to assist the discernment, affirmation, and empowerment of those gifts for the building up of the Body of Christ. This assistance requires a willingness to consider curricular change and to personalize programs to allow for individual needs and prior experience as well as careful attention to identifying and nurturing gifts for ministry among the student community so that the gifts entrusted to the church may not be wasted or lost.

### ***Theology of transformation***

The Aquinas commitment to collaboration of lay and ordained, men and women, in an inclusive, culturally diverse, intergenerational community is a commitment to paradigm shifts and new relationships, and ultimately to a deep and lasting transformation of ecclesial ministry. A theology of transformation is grounded in a conviction of the ever-creative newness of the Spirit at work within the church. The role of the leader is to support that transformation, but a conviction about the transforming power at work among us demands a willingness to live in the tension of resistance, deal with conflict, stay with the struggle, courageously face the questions, confront destructive behavior, and continually attend to the collegial process. Donna Markham expresses these demands more positively:

Effective leadership is about liberation, about loving, about listening, about telling the truth and taking risks, about solidifying the circle of friends for the sake of mission. Spiritlinking leaders are mentors committed to open communication, to serving, and to making sure conflict is handled well.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Commitment to reconciliation***

Willingness to tell the truth must be firmly linked to the work of reconciliation. Relationships with faculty and students may get frayed, break down, become strained or even hostile, but the work of reconciliation, the movement toward healing, must compel our minds and hearts to reach beyond the barriers. Over and over again we have to return to the conversation and face resistance, to assure the atmosphere of civility that is a pre-condition for charity and deeper acceptance of differences. We can never abandon or permanently foreclose on the dynamic of healing, forgiveness, and reconciliation that is the life of God's Spirit forming and transforming the community. And we know that it often costs nothing less than everything.

The truth expressed in the previous paragraph is not just theory but rather personal truth purified in the fire of experience and failure. Fall 1999 will be forever remembered as a "high-stress period" in Aquinas history. Renovation of the building was behind schedule, construction of new offices not yet completed, and workers were putting in central air conditioning. At orientation in August, I said to the students: "Classes will meet on schedule, but I am not sure where. Please watch the bulletin board daily for room changes." Plaster dust seemed to cover every flat surface, the student lounge was uninhabitable, and when our workers were not hammering or sawing through walls and ceilings, sounds of the renovation of the building next door filled the temporary respite. In addition to the chaos of the environment, we had begun in-service with the faculty for the incorporation of technology in classroom teaching. As I look back, I cannot imagine a higher stress level for the faculty.



In retrospect it seems very appropriate that the pressures and frustrations would occasion a “culture of complaint.” But one evening as the women faculty gathered for prayer and dinner—a gathering we cherished as a time to enjoy one another—I heard the now familiar themes of lament and frustration in the conversation. Instead of listening and learning and understanding how difficult the time was for all, I exploded in exasperation. The stunned looks around the table made me instantly aware that I had violated our gathering and destroyed the evening. I was there with my sisters, my colleagues, my friends—but I was also there as dean. My exasperation was not simply my personal frustration but was the dean accusing the faculty.

The task of reconciliation took time. I felt both foolish and ashamed, and I had to hear how deeply I had offended my sisters by my loss of control and my failure to remember that as dean I could not abdicate my responsibility to build up rather than tear down. Donna Markham’s words could well become a mantra for frazzled deans: “Effective leadership is about liberation, about loving, about listening, about telling the truth and taking risks, about solidifying the circle of friends for the sake of mission.” I may have told *my* emotional truth, but such imprudent “telling the truth” shatters rather than solidifies.

### *Prophetic vocation*

In the present historical moment of ecclesial life, when “restorationists” work to roll back the reforms of Vatican II, schools of theology are called to a prophetic vocation that is grounded in deep and broad scholarly knowledge of the tradition and, because of that grounding, unafraid to engage that tradition with the contemporary questions. Living in creative tension with the church demands a sense of prophetic vocation that can speak the truth *to the church* as well as *for the church*. Theological leadership must support the role of the theologian in the church and nurture the communal vocation of a theological faculty.

### *The signs of the times*

Pope John XXIII in *Pacem in Terris* called the church to “read the sign of the times,” to recognize the movements within human history where God may be summoning us to recognize new challenges or to devise new ways of meeting these challenges. Within the world of theological education, I see the ATS accrediting standards that summon us to new excellence as communities of faith and learning, and the creative challenge offered by Lilly Endowment as “signs of the times”—movements where God is calling us to conversion and renewed dedication to the holy work of preparing ministers for the church. These two movements have asked of us critical reflection, creative visioning, and strategic planning—the primary tasks of leadership.

The theological vision of “the signs of the times” is grounded in the Catholic sacramental imagination that understands grace to be mediated in

creation and history and culture, in human relationships and activities. Thus, in the challenges and resources offered to us by ATS and by Lilly Endowment, I see God's Spirit at work forming and transforming us through ecclesial tensions, cultural challenges, and historical movements. They will not let us settle down, and for that we must be grateful.

### **Tasks of Leadership**

In the collaborative culture of Aquinas Institute, leadership is exercised in a collegial manner. As dean I have had the privileged experience of shared leadership with a talented, energetic president of great vision and organizational gifts. We have developed a strong partnership marked by sustained communication, processing ideas, testing assumptions, and raising critical questions. This dynamic is almost "daily bread." Thus, the primary tasks of leadership at the level of vision and mission are grounded in an intentional partnership worn smooth by sustained dialogue and shared responsibility. Like all things human, this commitment to partnership requires conscious effort and occasional mending. Both the modeling and the mending presume that the transforming grace at work among us demands a willingness to master the art of the apology and to renew our mutual commitment to "one mind and one heart" so that together we might promote the common good.

A theology of charisms challenges leadership to stay attentive to persons and movements within the community. The dean or the president does not have to conceive every good idea, but we do need to be open and able to recognize when the good ideas and new directions are emerging. Leadership that values diversity also needs to make sure that structures are open and inclusive, that multiple voices are heard. Gifts are given for the building up of the community, and leadership must offer both support and discernment. The critical task of discernment requires the leader to stay in relationship with faculty, staff, and students—to listen, absorb, encourage, and *challenge*.

Openness to paradigm shifts and new possibilities in a time of rapid growth must be firmly anchored in understanding of the tradition and mission entrusted to us. Wisdom grows in the creative interface of the tension between what has been and what can be.

Another task integral to leadership is the work of hospitality, helping to create a culture of welcome, not just for the family and the familiar but also for the stranger and the alien. In the contemporary ecclesial moment when ideological differences are beginning to strain the fabric of the theological conversation, leadership must help the community find the "common ground" in the classroom, the faculty assembly, and the ongoing theological conversation. A community that values collaboration and partnership is not a gathering of like-minded people but rather a place where all voices can be heard and cherished values respected in a communal quest for truth. This task is perhaps the greatest challenge of the immediate future within the Catholic world.

Finally, leaders in theological education today must attend to the communal vocation of the theological faculty. Within the Catholic community, this communal self-understanding is emerging from contemporary reflection on the role of the theologian in the church occasioned by *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*. If we understand the theologian working in communion with the church, contributing to the ongoing reception of the tradition by opening it up to the real questions of the historical moment, then theology takes on all the questions that concern human beings. The work of theology is best done in a community of scholars who can together hone insights, encourage one another, and mentor one another in faithful pursuit of the truth. Because seminaries and schools of theology are focused on imparting and interpreting the tradition to men and women preparing for church ministry, we should be a natural setting for the formation of such scholarly communities. We know that most of our schools have not realized that ideal, but the task lies before us with new urgency.

## Conclusion

This attempt at a contextual theology of leadership has become an exercise in self-knowledge that makes me aware that I am only skimming the surface of my experience. However, I have arrived at a conviction and a question.

My conviction is that underlying the theological perspectives is a persistent theme: *relationship*. My leadership is situated in a matrix of relationships—with the president, the faculty, the administrative team, the students, the church, and the wider community of theological education. These relationships are complex and often complicated. The daily demands of personal presence, patient civility, gracious interaction, critical reflection, openness to divergent views, attention to others' needs, thoughtful decision-making, honest response, and sustained mutuality are met at an enormous personal cost.

My further conviction is that a leader called to function within such a matrix at this moment in ecclesial history must attend to the maintenance of a balanced, healthy, holy lifestyle. We all can recite the essential components of that lifestyle: prayer, study, reflection, rest, exercise, personal relationships, community, leisure, the arts. *And we all intend to achieve that balance soon.* But the present context gives this ancient wisdom special pertinence. The pace of change and the ecclesial tensions, the intellectual challenges and economic exigencies, the academic pressures and professional expectations combine to make leadership in contemporary theological education a high-stress role. Only a person who lives from her center can stand at the center of that world and fulfill her responsibilities. The essential components I enumerated above all converge to draw us to our inner center where mystery dwells and wisdom awaits. Somehow the first item on our agenda has to be a personal integrity committed to a balanced lifestyle so that we may be faithful to the mission entrusted to us.

## *A Contextual Theology of Leadership*

My question takes me back to my beginning. I have explored the experience of a woman dean to articulate a theology of leadership. Does it matter that it is a woman who writes? If so, what is the significance? I am tempted to let my readers grapple with those questions, but I must sketch the beginnings of my own response. Assuredly, the emphasis on relationship, confidence in process, and somewhat naïve optimism are proper to this woman. However, I came to the role of dean after twenty years of collaborative engagement with the women and men of the Order to work out new models of ministry together. But in the past ten years, I have grown in awareness of the significance of gender differences as we assume new roles and responsibilities. Those differences need not be obstacles; their challenge can lead to richer understanding and more nuanced insight into the human experience. But they are very real. Even when we get beyond the distortions of stereotypes and allow our differences to be a source of richness, we must embrace a “ministry of clarification” and have a willingness to keep listening and keep learning. This deepened knowledge of the importance of gender makes me confident that this article clearly reveals that the human person whose experience has been set forth as a valid “source of reality” for this reflection is a woman.

*Diane Kennedy, O.P., is vice president and academic dean of Aquinas Institute of Theology in St. Louis, Missouri. She served on the ATS Executive Committee from 1990-96 and was president of the Association from 1996-98. She currently is a member of the ATS Advisory Committee for Women in Leadership in Theological Education.*

### ENDNOTES

1. Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994), 2-3.
2. Donna J. Markham, *Spiritlinking Leadership: Working through Resistance to Organizational Change* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1999), 2-3.
3. *Ibid.*, 11.

# A Womanist Perspective on Spirituality in Leadership

*Emilie M. Townes*

*Union Theological Seminary, New York*

*The following is the text of an address that was delivered at the October 2000 consultation of the ATS Women in Leadership in Theological Education Program. The consultation convened all the women who had participated in the three-year program that was supported by a grant from the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation.*

Let us pray:

There's going to be all kinds of roads to take in life. . . . Let's not be afraid to take them. We deserve them, because we're all good women. Do you. . . do you understand who we are, and what we have become? We're the daughters of those old dusty things Nana carries in her tin can. . . . We carry too many scars from the past. Our past owns us. We wear our scars like armor, . . . for protection. Our mother's scars, our sister's scars, our daughter's scars. . . . Thick, hard, ugly scars that no one can pass through to ever hurt us again. Let's live our lives without living in the fold of old wounds.

Eula

*Daughters of the Dust*

**W**e do not love ourselves. We do not love a whole holy God.

The film *Daughters of the Dust* by the African American film maker, Julie Dash, is stunning in its power and scope. It tells the story of a Black sea-island or Gullah family preparing to come to the mainland at the turn of the century. Tradition, change, migration, and bondedness to the land are woven together in the Peasant family. The memories of slavery and working in the indigo plantation of the island are the stuff of history books, they are written in the hands of the older members of the island and in the stories they tell to the younger ones, the games the young and old still play, and in the African and Arabic words they continue to teach the children.

The history and mythobiography of the film capture my imagination again and again. The words I began my time with you this morning come from that movie. They are from the character, Eula, who had been raped by a white man. The narrator of the movie, the Unborn Child, is Eula's child. Only the audience knows that the child she carries is truly the one she conceived, in love, with her husband Eli. As Eula speaks, near the end of the movie, she calls the women to task for ostracizing Yellow Mary, a prostitute, who turned to this

*A Womanist Perspective on Spirituality in Leadership*

life after her own experience of rape. Yellow Mary had come home to the island to be with her family again and to heal. Eula reminds them all that the fate and hope of Yellow Mary is their own—no one escapes the ravages of evil, no one stands outside of the promise. Then she turns to the younger women and her words are for us as well.

There's going to be all kinds of roads in life to take, let's not be afraid to take them. We deserve them because we're all good women . . . Let's live our lives without living in the fold of old wounds.

It is within this constellation of possibilities that I want to spend some time with you. The notion of all kinds of roads. Our willingness, or not, to take them. The fact that we are, most of us, good women. But we are the daughters of those dusty things that Nana carries in her tin can—there are scars: class ceilings; discriminations based on gender, sexual orientation, weight, beauty, race, age, religiosity, culture. And yes, we do wear some of those scars. For some of us they are like armor because we have discovered that we do need protection. But what does this do to us, ultimately, when we live our lives in the folds of old wounds? When we cannot see another way to be except the one we experienced as being so harmful to us—until we mastered it? And learned to write *its* script in *our* actions?

These, dear colleagues, are the kinds of questions that a womanist spirituality of leadership asks. They are not questions that are designed to be lullabies that rock us into a sweet sleep. They are questions that ask each of us—you and me—to think through what it means to be responsible, and to be willing to take responsibility that can help shape an institution, guide a career, light a pathway to knowledge and wisdom, or not.

womanist spirituality is a

lived experience of faith

it is embodied in people

and found in the concrete contexts in which people live out their faith

it is grounded in the context of struggling for faith and justice

it takes on antagonistic dualisms as unhealthy in many places in our faith journeys

it is an ongoing faithfilled process—a ripening and ripening into wholeness

living out womanist spirituality—integrating faith and life

means that we recognize that we are made in God's image  
indeed, God's presence is the very fabric of our existence  
immanent & transcendent  
close as our breathing  
no, God is not an option or on the supplemental reading list  
for God's love for us is unconditional  
yes, God makes demands, has commands  
and perhaps the simplest and hardest of these  
is that we are called to live our lives out of the possibilities  
not our shortcomings  
answering yes to God's what if  
this love moves us to grow in compassion, understanding, and acceptance  
of each other  
it is the formation of a divine/human community based on love and  
hope  
and pointed toward justice  
we are to listen for and hear the word of God  
a call for responsibility, contemplation  
in the lives of others *and in our lives*  
for in the personal search for spiritual understanding we are also engaged  
in the human struggle  
and in the midst of human struggle we are, some of us, called to  
step out and step in and lead  
but i think we must stay mindful that spirituality involves  
living our lives with integrity and faithfulness in God  
it means coming to a sense of self, finding our identity

*A Womanist Perspective on Spirituality in Leadership*

for me, spirituality encompasses all of life

and as a spirituality of life

we must take care that we do not spin our lives, our careers, our ministries around a success ethic

that is grounded in measurable gains

and regrettable losses

rather, we seek to proclaim the dignity of life

and this can be a challenge as we go about our lives

for it is easy to lose sight of this, sometimes, in the midst of budget woes

challenging students

i mean the ones that appear on the agenda  
of the student affairs committee every  
month the good lord sends

dueling faculty

unyielding/unreasonable co-workers

phones that ring without ceasing

calls that are never returned

but i suggest that if we think about the call to proclaim the dignity of all people as a strength

rather than as a virtue

that we can then draw comfort and sustenance from this proclamation

because i truly believe that it helps us tap into the ability to *continually* call forth hope and righteous agency

in the midst of those times we are called to step out and guide others on their journey

even as we are uncovering our own



for as womanist this spirituality is embodied, personal, communal

as it brings together the historic force of black women's spiritual  
lives with the demand of the spirit to contextualize and live one's  
faith

it is reflection on the particularity of one's own faith journey lived  
and unfolded in community

and when we turn to issues of leadership and how we do it or not as women

all women

it begins with us

with you and me

it is, then, to begin with pieces of what it means to being women all the time

I.

being women all the time

is like breathing in and out

it is like the moments of smiles and whispers

it is like warmth and passion

it is like naming a voice through the song you sing

it is like the roll of dice weighted to come up doubles

but to reach for your winnings

and find nothing there

being women all the time

is like breathing in and out

it is like finding yourself in the midst of degradation

and having the will to stake a claim for liberation

it is like turning and turning and turning into a shimmering  
tomorrow

*A Womanist Perspective on Spirituality in Leadership*

it is like hearing a still, small voice

that you craft into a roaring wind

as you see and feel wholeness as no longer an abstract,  
sterile category

but what we all yearn for

so we can, if we must, begin with the wounds

those scars, in Eula's words, that are our mothers', daughters',  
sisters'

thick and hard so no one can ever pass through to hurt us again

the folds of those old wounds, that have in some cases maimed us

with the lies, secrets, and silences we are told about other women

that we are told about ourselves

these wounds mark us, but they do not need to define us

for as wise women

or women seeking wisdom

we must grasp a hermeneutic of suspicion

that is, we must examine our first works over

again and again

and consider how we are with each other

and let the larger institutions care for themselves for awhile

as you and i seek to ponder

what it means for each of us

to be in this work of leadership

yes we are all subject to the ravages of structural racism, sexism,  
heterosexism, classism, ageism, ableism

we have also participated  
in holding these “isms”  
these masters’ *and* mistresses’ tools  
in *our* hands

and, my sisters  
we have used them  
sometimes relentlessly

we have used them  
to avoid our depression and discontent  
by cheering ourselves and finding a woman who is worse  
off than we are

to avoid the questions we have about our beauty  
by failing to question who sets the standards  
and then dressing  
literally  
to kill

to protect ourselves against charges that we aren’t feminine  
by pointing to someone who may  
or may not  
be tougher than we are  
to prove that we really *do* know the color pink

to cloak our fears that we may not be bright enough or talented  
enough  
by ridiculing other women  
and charging that they are sublimating their  
frustrations

*A Womanist Perspective on Spirituality in Leadership*

in their work

in the church

in the vision for a more whole pedagogical  
vision that can address where people will  
be and already are as we head into the 21st  
century

II.

tears and sighs

screams and shouts

the movement, the passion

for liberation comes in a variety of sounds and textures

too often we suffer and forfeit our lives

through the silences that muzzle and stifle

through a warped sense of tradition as hegemonic

rather than tradition as reminder of the dreams and hopes for a  
vision of our passages into wholeness

it is a terrible thing to lose one's voice

to demons of self hatred

and horizontal violence

and a vision of one—and we are the only one

it is deadly to never find our voices

for we model our ministries

and our witness

after styles that are not who we are

or fashions and modes that only challenge

our gifts and abilities  
into a small and narrow space in our souls  
and we lose the vitality and hope  
we learned in sunday school  
and prayer meeting  
and wednesday night bible study  
and all those chicken dinners and fish fries  
and just sitting in the presence of the Spirit  
but my sisters  
it is tragic when we fail to recognize it in another tone  
or perhaps in a different octave  
silencing and voicing are marrow for tradition  
we must listen closely through our expectations and categories  
to hear *God's* call to us  
to join with creation  
and to move away from speculating  
who is going where  
who is doing what  
and how did she manage that, anyway  
our categories of reflection  
run rough shod over the subtleties of the gospel  
and the kind of pithy witness we are called to  
in short  
our schools and our churches need new visions that may be shaped  
from old dreams

*A Womanist Perspective on Spirituality in Leadership*

but perhaps not  
we cannot keep doing it the way it has been done  
and believe that we are doing the work of God  
or calling this leadership  
and that a just and whole kingdom will come

for a womanist spirituality of leadership knows that genuine liberation is  
loud work

it is a multiplicity of voices  
in which the keys are *not* meant to blend  
but the ruckus stands as a sign of movement  
of hope

by taking a whole new look at what it means  
for us  
to call ourselves educators, presidents, deans, librarians,  
development officers, teachers, scholars. . . faithful

we are not called to be tourists  
who will simply inflict more damage to the environment

we are not to provide feminine cannon fodder for a bureaucracy that likes to  
declare its holiness or its scholarliness or its relevance

while colleagues engage in mind-numbing studious lint picking  
from their scholastic navels

while white male academics rail on about how white men can't find  
jobs and then look at you and me as if we should dignify such inane  
chatter

while students call out for practical skills for ministry and some of  
us immediately assume that they are trying to avoid "the real"  
courses in the curriculum

while issues of class go unaddressed every day and in every way as  
we plan course schedules, academic calendars, funding initiatives,  
and the pedagogy that fuels our curricula

and while the increased enrollment of women students across the  
socioeconomic and racial ethnic spectrum

is what is keeping many of our institutions afloat financially

or at least gives us enough buckets to keep bailing water  
until the capital campaign begins to reap benefits

a womanist spirituality of leadership means

declaring that part of who we are is about seeking liberation

daring transformation

living justice

it means that we must challenge ourselves to live into a new vision of what  
it means to be ministers

lay and ordained, academicians and church-based, agency  
oriented and denominational

to a word and a grace that is amazing

and ask tough questions of ourselves and our churches and our  
academic institutions and our ministries

about just how faithful are we being

when there is a whole laundry list of things we *cannot* talk  
about in many of our churches

and that list is made up of people's lives and  
people's questions

their joys, their fears, their heart and soul

and we somehow deem this as nasty or worldly or evil

we should be ashamed of ourselves and the not-so-sacred spaces we create  
when we do this

*A Womanist Perspective on Spirituality in Leadership*

a womanist spirituality of leadership

that heads out for liberation

means that we begin with ourselves

it means that the prophetic liberation we say we want

say we need

know we must have

must be more than so many coins in a bankrupt economy

that traffics in people's lives

as so much loose change

what this spirituality makes clear for us is that

liberation means unpacking the gospel *into* living

there are many leadership models out there for us

but to take them on without asking the basic questions of justice and liberation

is an exercise in obsequious sycophancy at best

and an ill-conceived drag show at worst

what i argue for, this morning

is for a re-commissioning of the bell tones of how we think about leadership

and more importantly the styles of leadership we adopt

we need a style of leadership that does not rationalize

climbing on each others' backs

rather than lifting as we climb

for a style of leadership that simply exchanges one gender for another while it continues to suppress and oppress others



is offering others  
and settling for ourselves  
a partial gospel  
muffled success  
flawed strategies  
and a ministry that is dying  
if not already dead  
we have much to learn from each other  
i doubt i am the only one in here who had a  
miz waddell  
miz wynne  
miz carter  
nana  
and jesus  
as you were growing up  
there is a need to recapture for ourselves  
where we are quickly losing, if not have already lost it  
our ability to sit down as women with each other  
and give each other the important details of living  
share with each other how we have survived  
how we have thrived  
and how we understand the power of success  
the fear of failure  
the power of failure  
and the fear of success

*A Womanist Perspective on Spirituality in Leadership*

being women all the time

means we must place ourselves not in the role

of host or hostess

and open up a few more rooms for the next generation to  
live in

of a house crafted on sin and debasement

and our only concern is when to do the next maintenance  
task

rather than constructing a more just home

being women all the time

means opening ourselves up to the hard task of defining a new way  
to be ministers—together

of exploring the possibilities

of searching through our memories

of holding on to our dreams

of listening again and again

to the voice and voices of our call

being women all the time

recognizes that we can't run off with someone else's ministry

because even when we steal

that doesn't make it ours

it only makes it stolen

stretch into *your* ministry—discover anew what leadership can and must  
mean when it is grounded in grace rather than solely on the latest harvard  
or wharton business model of success

walk around in it

sit down and play  
with the holy sand  
God has given you  
for who you are is gift  
and what *your* ministry  
your sense of being and guiding with others  
your sense of lifting as you climb  
your leadership style  
is to become awe-some

III.

so what of the larger worlds in which we travel, have our being, help to  
shape, question and resist

with a history (and a present) that includes such vulgar spectacles as  
auction blocks and lynchings and pedestals

it is ludicrous for women

to believe for one second

that there is any possibility that we can do the work within  
ourselves and in our institutional households without  
recognizing the powers that shape the worlds in which we  
live

some of us in this room do not live in the much acclaimed public and  
private split

for as when i was growing up

it was clear that black folks did not have a private life that was not  
at the beck and call of hegemony

even my search for paradise was tinged with the blinding  
white hot evils of white and male and economic  
supremacies

*A Womanist Perspective on Spirituality in Leadership*

we did have citadels of hope

and outposts of resistance

we did have separate but equal

and Jim Crow

but what we really had to struggle *for* was a private world that was genuinely our own

one that wasn't shaped and formed by dominating others

but one that we could actually call and know to be home

given that this is the place from which i move and try to understand the stump from which i speak, it is clear to me that

the dominant gaze makes that which is named private obscured in the prescribed public realms of the dominating others

this mournful gaze does not recognize the richness of black cultures

it resorts to collapsing black realities into postmodern minstrel shows

it seeks to freeze frame black life

without recognizing that even when we all share a common language

the rhythms and cadences of living are different and rich within themselves

and within the communities of black life as well

the private has never *been* private in u.s. colored lives

it has been controlled and manipulated to fit the news at 5, 6 and 10 (central time)

it has been a place where various forms of the police state could, did, and do enter at will

it has produced casualties in see-through body bags

so that even our pain and our sorrow become the stuff of romanticization and novels

it has vented an endless stream of stereotypes and prototypes of  
black wickedness and sexualized body parts

and sadly, oh so sadly

many of these brutalized and brutalizing images have been  
internalized in black communities

and in the individual lives of black women and children and men

for far too many of us

this not so private sphere is a place of paralyzing demons

some, in our communities, have slipped into an endless spiral of  
horizontal violence

some have neither martin's dream

malcolm's nightmare

walker's color purple

or mama day's lightening powder

so, quite frankly, womanist thought engages in a renewed search for a  
moment-by-moment spirituality

that can issue in leadership styles that build on (and with) each  
other's lives rather than pyramids of evil

a womanist spirituality of leadership

is to search for home, to seek liberation

for liberation, to this womanist's mind, is to find a home

that is a place for health, healing, identity formation, resistance,  
celebration, transformation

not only for one, but for all

that is the place where the "real lives" the "real worlds" of peoples  
take place

not the media-driven images of black living that trick all of  
us into believing and/or living into grotesque stereotypes  
of black life

*A Womanist Perspective on Spirituality in Leadership*

not the death-dealing images of success that trick us into  
thinking our accomplishments are ours alone

not the mind-numbing bromides of leadership that include  
fear tactics, terrorist acts, bullying, lying, avoiding, fronting,  
and simply not giving a damn about anything but the  
bottom line, pr, and piling up legacies

it is the place where the realities of diversity, difference,  
disagreement, harmony, hope, justice all exist

it is the place that shapes the radical differences within our lives as  
women such that we are not a monolithic community, but an  
eclectic and diverse compendium of communities

it is the place of core resistance to devaluing oppressions

oh yes, for a womanist spirituality of leadership, home is a place of rest

a place where we get things done, sometimes alone, but mostly with  
others

a place that we are still learning to create in a social order that  
features a suffocating regime of interstructured inequality

it is the place of morrison's dancing mind

walker's world in our eye

sanchez's house of lions

it is a place, that we are building, life by life

in which we yoke our individual lives with communal  
accountability

and learn a communal hope that teaches us as we  
learn

to love our eyes

backs  
hands  
mouths  
feet  
shoulders  
arms  
necks

inside parts  
lungs  
life-holding wombs  
life-giving private  
parts  
hearts  
spirits  
souls

leadership built on liberating justice

is a place to gain strength for the journey

so that we learn to live creatively in the tight circle of choices that  
are given to us by this social order we all live in

but also plot, scheme, and realize ways to craft that tight circle into  
a spiral of possibilities for this generation

and serve as the standing ground for the next generation  
and the next generation and beyond

yes, it is true that we make choices within a culture and socioeconomic and  
theo-ethical reality

that is geared for warring

violence

destruction

and the annihilation of the enemy, the other

and this makes the idea of liberating justice

at times

an obscene phone call

a dirty joke

a utopian pipedream

one, which at times chokes

because anger and rage come so quickly

*A Womanist Perspective on Spirituality in Leadership*

and completely

that we cannot draw our collective or individual breaths

because it implies a choice or a set of choices that have not been part  
of the historic reality of the lives of most, if not all, black women,  
and many women across the color spectrum

for you see,

choice, like poetry, is not a luxury

it is a right

one that has been denied

subverted

violated

pillaged

so womanist wit and wisdom holds fast to dreaming a world

that is a more powerful

more real

more concretely and materially just world

a world that shakes with liberating fury and passion

as it designs and sets in motion the plot lines of justice and freedom

because we know that liberating hope is the only defense against  
subjugating despair and ruin

yes, the "isms" of all of our lives come in dolby sound

they are layered upon layer

woven with a thin thread

with tensile strength

and a tight pattern



we can't get at one without dealing with the other

if we are careful *not* to use the masters' tools

the yearning and struggle for liberating justice in our work as leaders is the kind of thing

that brings out the biggest, best, and most seductive of the masters' tools

because when the spirit gets wrapped up in how we lead

it means those tools will be banished

forbidden

made obsolete—and even *tools* want to survive

transformatory womanist spirituality recognizes that

this is hard work

necessary work

and may be very lonely work at times

that is why we must find and nurture allies

not only to suit our needs, desires, and plans

but those who will challenge and call forth the best from us

who will tell us the plain truth of our acts

and how they affect those around us like ripples on a pond

or sometimes like tidal waves after the quake

to consult only those who look and act and think and are just like us is not going to change anything

a womanist spirituality of leadership calls us to

listen for the voices

accepting the variety

*A Womanist Perspective on Spirituality in Leadership*

allowing the voices within our communities

the young and the old

the lesbian and the gay

the propertied and the propertyless

the heterosexual and the celibate

the dark and the light

the bisexual and the transgendered,

the female and the male

the conservative and the radical

the thoughtful and the clueless

all these and more

to have a full and authentic and *valued* place as we sort  
through how to lead and how to follow

realizing that there are many paths to freedom—and slavery—and  
death

living our lives outside of the folds of those old, old wounds means that we  
learn to love ourselves

for this is to love our bodies

which means tackling the gross iconization of our lives

that comes from the false dichotomy of public and private in white  
western self-absorbed penile thought

for when womanists talk about the body

it is both the personal and the communal body

i first learned about this body from the older black women in my life

and it was years before i realized that they were not just talking  
about *my* body

they included miss hemphill down the road

miss rosie across the street

miss montez around the corner

and cousin willie mae down by the juke  
house

my body was placed in a witness of women

who knew violation

enjoyed sex

moved with dignity

and shook from religious ecstasy

i learned that there was always the possibility that some injustice might be  
done to my body

and bodies of other black folk

but also knew i had a home to come to and they would  
stand by me

there would be times when it seemed my options were few

but i had a right to scream

to say no

to fight back

to do what i thought best to protect any violation  
against the dignity of my body

*and i had an obligation to teach this right to other black boys and girls as  
well*

they crafted a community of healing that was a refuge of loving women  
(and sometimes men)

to heal a scarred throat

or bruised knuckles

*A Womanist Perspective on Spirituality in Leadership*

or brutalized body

they taught me that i was a child of God

and in some strange, if not halting way

that meant i was free

but i'd have to fight for it

all those women are gone now

but what they left me with is the deep knowledge that the  
community they created and gifted me with

*must* be re-created

but it takes the strong and the weak *together* who will refuse to accept inept  
silence or self-abnegating sacrifice as the only options

who will hold themselves accountable to the spirit

who *will* choose to live rather than die

because silence suffocates when it is prompted from  
violence and fear

and this is a truly slow and obscene death

but we've got to understand the system

in order to maneuver into places which celebrate our bodies

and learn how to turn racism and sexism and classism and ageism

and even homophobia and heterosexism

into occasions to not only speak, but also do justice

we can name the violation and abuse

and then act to eradicate it

we understand that choices are often tight

but that some of us come from the tradition of the trickster

and there are *always* ways to create new options

but it will take courage and cunning and faith  
to get there  
those women did not tell me how you do all this  
but they did teach me how to use an oyster knife  
womanist oyster knives  
are made with craftiness  
calculation  
joy  
care  
and faith  
and we are polishing them  
yes, it may seem that my words to you about leadership and liberation and  
justice sound like they come from some place in paradise  
and maybe they do  
but this is not a paradise of theme parks with gerrymandered thrills  
and fears  
but a paradise of hope, love, justice, joy, resistance, and liberation  
a paradise that puts salve on those scars we all carry  
a paradise that does not try to smooth over the fold of our old  
wounds  
*but it refuses to live in their hollows*  
it is a paradise built on an enduring faith  
and an outright colored stubbornness that simply will not stop until  
justice comes

*Emilie M. Townes is professor of Christian ethics at Union Theological Seminary in  
New York, New York.*

